

Ryo Yamada and her Fateful Meeting of a Cat

By: TheEpicTyper0

Honestly the title speaks for itself. Ryo meets a cat. The band's life changes forever. Kinda.

A collection of connected stories of Kessoku Band, with a cat.

(at this point, it's a cinematic universe)

Status: complete

Published: 2023-04-12

Updated: 2024-01-16

Words: 135289

Chapters: 29

Original source: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/46437025>

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Ryo Yamada and her Fateful Meeting of a Cat

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[\(part 1\)](#)

[\(part 2\)](#)

[Chapter 4 \(finale\)](#)

[Chapter 5 \(part 1\)](#)

[Chapter 5 \(part 2\)](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7 \(part 1\)](#)

[Chapter 7 \(part 2\)](#)

[Chapter 7: Aftermath](#)

[Chapter 8 \(part 1\)](#)

[Chapter 8 \(part 2\)](#)

[Chapter 9 \(part 1\)](#)

[Chapter 9 \(part 2\)](#)

[Chapter 9 \(Finale: Talk\)](#)

[Chapter 9: Aftermath](#)

[Interlude I](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Interlude II](#)

[Interlude III](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 11: B Side](#)

[Interlude IV](#)

[Interlude V](#)

[What Ifs: I](#)

[Chapter 12: Prelude](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Ryo sighed as she slumped further into her chair, becoming one with the steel object. It was another typical workday at Starry, but it seemed that things were going sluggish today. She'd been assigned at reception, with the others helping Kita get more accustomed with tending the bar. Despite having worked there for a while, she still wasn't used to keeping track of where everything was. Even though Nijika insisted that she really didn't need to go that far, Kita heavily insisted with her usual trillion gigawatt aura. Of course, 'can't-say-no-Hitori' agreed with her, stating that she too would like to ingrain everything in her brain. Probably to keep her place in the band and not be outshined (literally) by Kita, or something along the lines of that. She was getting better at understanding Hitori's thought process. A Bocchi expert in the making. She deserved a certificate.

She even brought her guitar to help - Nijika told her about their first day on the job, when she pulled that out of nowhere and began to shred. With everything she has seen from the girl, that's pretty tame. And honestly, pretty cool too. Maybe she should show off her slapping skills to the others one day.

Nijika was also there to help, but really she was there in case Hitori nuked the whole place in pink goop again from all of the attention she would get. Although Kita always meant well and would never set her off on purpose, Nijika was wise to know that she had a tendency to cause 'Bocchi Time'. Her sparkling eyes, extroverted energy, and have you seen her infamous aura? She had to be there, acting as the Kita Dampener, like a lamp shade to a ridiculously bright lamp.

Well, now she was stuck here. Near the entrance of Starry. Waiting for someone, or anyone really. Not that she minded being alone - in fact, she enjoyed the solitude. Out of everyone in the group, she was the one who embraced being 'the loner'. Yes, she enjoys her time

with her band (even more so when they treat her lunch - those memories will stick with her forever), but she also needs her 'me time'. Her Ryo Yamada time.

Nope, that doesn't roll off the tongue as well as Bocchi Time.

Her thoughts always kept her company when she was alone. They were also hilarious too. Recently, she thought of Kita the Lamp with a Nijika lampshade. Genius. She should be a comedian as a side gig. Then amaze the crowd with her slapping skills. She'd get tons of cash fast.

Nice one Ryo. Thanks Ryo.

With her body about to slip off the chair, she straightened herself and propped her arms onto the table. She leaned into one of her hands as she drummed the table with her free hand, allowing herself to get deep into thought. If anyone saw her now, they would comment on how thoughtful Ryo was - perhaps maybe even assume she was an intellectual, spending her free time coming up with the cure for cancer or the next breakthrough in technology. Maybe Kita had a point with how cool she looks, albeit blinded by love.

Nijika would laugh at the thought of me being so smart and cool, huh.

She sighed again, heard by nobody but her. It'd be nice to have Nijika here with her. Not that she didn't like the others, but with Kita's unrelenting affection towards her and a high chance for Hitori to short circuit from overthinking, she was the next best person to have. But alas, they were all busy. Maybe having another Ryo would be nice, but she couldn't clone herself nor did she know how to if it were possible.

Besides, there's only room for one for the funniest person in Kessoku Band. Although, Bocchi is a close second. Sorry Nijika.

In the middle of Ryo giving her respects to Nijika's humour, the door to Starry opened. She quickly sat up and prepared to greet the person, mentally readying her usual routine conversation...

But there was nobody there.

Did a ghost enter? Why Starry out of all places? Wait, do ghosts even exist?

Possibilities squirrelled around her head as they became more outlandish. A literal brain storm was brewing.

Maybe it's the ghost of the owner of the field of grass I ate from last week. Oh gosh, I should thank them for the wonderful -

A small, meek meow pierced through her sludge of brain activity, and Ryo is forced to look for the source of the sound. She finds it, on the ground looking directly at her.

Apparently, a cat managed to push through the door. Adorning orange fur that was a bit matted in some parts, Ryo knew this was a stray. It wasn't uncommon to run into a stray here in Shimokitazawa, and the locals seem to take care of them well. She even petted some of them before when she had street performances.

They kind of remind me of Bocchi. She's cute. Mental note.

The cat meowed again, as if asking something from her.

"Sorry kitty, I don't have money." Ryo responded.

Cats don't need money you goofball.

"Oh yeah." she responded out loud.

She was about to head back to the others to get some food for the cat, but stopped herself midway leaving the chair. It didn't look malnourished or even hungry - quite the healthy cat that waltzed in today. The cat seemed to want... something else?

And that's when she saw the cat somehow squint its eyes ever so slightly. A familiar sight.

"Ah... so that's how it is eh? Bring it on."

She steeled her resolve as she began to stare into the amber eyes of the cat. Sometimes, out of nowhere, Nijika would initiate an unprompted staring contest with Ryo, giving her a somewhat similar stare like the cat did to telepathically tell Ryo that the game is on. Except this time, this was serious. With Nijika, Ryo tended to win and they'd both laugh it off - at least Ryo would. Nijika's really competitive. But with this cat, it was different. What kind of cat enters a random place and challenges the first person it sees to a staring contest? A cat?!

She was impressed. And a little bit scared.

So they stared. Time seemed to stand still as it watched two unlikely contestants in the ring of the most nerve-wracking staring contest brawl it out with their eyes. Ryo Yamada, self-proclaimed bass master of Kessoku Band versus a random cute cat that entered the place five minutes ago. Truly a battle was taking place right now. Something that people would talk about across generations, if anyone was watching.

But Ryo had other hurdles to jump through. She wasn't just bothered by the fact that a literal cat challenged her, master of blank stares, to a staring contest. She was also bothered by how much the cat was starting to remind her of a certain yellow-haired drummer. Sure, the fur wasn't yellow, but it was close enough. And the fact that the cat did such a Nijika thing. And, its eyes were exactly like Nijika's!

Did she turn into a cat? Or did she figure out how to clone herself, but as a cat? It's not like I could go over and ask her, with this cat staring right at me. Then I'd lose! And I never lose. Unless I do, but that's on purpose.

She could feel herself shaking, putting every ounce of energy she had into keeping her eyes aimed squarely onto the cat. Droplets of sweat began to form on her forehead as her pupils started to dilate. Meanwhile, her opponent has barely changed its calm and aloof stance, still sitting upright and cute.

What is this? Did Nijika empower this cat with unrelenting eyes? Or maybe Kita did? Or maybe Bocchi? She has a dog, right? Surely she knows how to train animals???

Ryo's eyes started to hurt, with her having to hold onto the desk for support. Tears started to form and mix with her sweat as her eyes begged her to stop. However, what hurt more was her pride. Ryo Yamada, losing to a cat. The shame! The embarrassment! She could not live on after defeat!

Hmmmnnhhggg!

Ok, maybe she could. It IS a cat. Besides, nobody was watching.

And so, making sure the Manager didn't have a secret camera by the entrance, she conceded, flopping back down on the chair with her head making a thud on the desk. Maybe hitting her head a bit harder than she'd like, but she was exhausted. She was panting, almost heaving as she desperately needed air. Her eyes savoured in darkness, relieved of their duty (that they failed, but A for effort?). Even with putting everything she's got into just looking at a cat, she couldn't win. She almost felt like she brought shame on the Yamada family name. She made a mental note to apologise to her parents. Perhaps they would understand her pain, and then increase her allowance in pity.

"Meeeow!"

Ryo looked back up from her shame to see the cat on the desk. It again was staring at her, but this time with an... almost... smug face? The audacity!

*First, you come in here, then you beat me at my own game, and **NOW** you come here to gloat?*

Her ego couldn't take any more. She shot up out of her chair, driven to gather what's left of her dignity. She was going to show this cat who's boss.

...

She WAS going to, but...

I can't. This cat is just too cute...

Sighing and accepting her defeat, she slumped back into the chair. The cat didn't seem to be bothered by her 'near attempt to obliterate', so Ryo slowly reached out her hand to pet the cat. Think of it as a prize for winning against The Ryo Yamada. Besides, she could use the comfort.

Its fur was very fluffy to the touch, soothing even - if not for her unacceptable loss still lingering. The cat nuzzled her hand, rubbing its adorable face on her palm. Her hand would cross over some matted fur, yet the cat did not budge. So, she continued to pet the cat, as the sting of defeat faded in place for a sense of peace. She was reminded of why she'd make the time to find stray cats to pet after her street performances. They always gave her a much needed time to unwind from her playing, before she'd carry on with her day.

Weirdly, her times with Nijika were similar. After work and practice, spending time with just her in an empty Starry was relaxing. Both would usually share a comfortable silence, broken by idle conversation that would spiral into familiar bickering as Nijika would tell her for the 25th time that eating only grass for a week straight was very unsafe, to which Ryo would respond by saying that she was part cow. It was nice. She was nice to be with.

And this cat is nice. Cuter than Nijika though. Sorry again.

Seemingly satisfied with its prize, the cat hopped off the desk and meowed at the door, asking for Ryo's help. She gladly obliged, opening the door just enough for the cat to pass through. With a farewell from both, a chirpy goodbye meow and a small wave, the cat left.

Ryo sat back down, not realising the small smile on her face that never left ever since she petted the cat.

Perhaps I should give it a name? Well, it did remind me of Nijika, so Nijicat? Doesn't sound right. Hmmm, I'm not sure if it'll come by again.

It hasn't even been minutes since the cat left, and Ryo began to feel lonely, but not in a content way. Her smile faded into almost a frown. She really missed that cat.

"Yo, Ryo! You doing ok at reception?"

Ah. Some company. Nice.

"Yup."

Nijika sat on the stool next to the reception desk. She managed to dampen Kita enough so that the two can coexist together, meeting up with Ryo to take a short break.

"Geez, both of them sure are a handful. Even after I told them they don't have to!" Nijika raised both of her arms to emphasise.

"Mm."

"Ahh, whatever." Nijika muttered as she essentially face planted onto the desk in exhaustion. "I'm just glad they're committed to the band."

"C'mon Nijika, we can't have our drummer out of energy. We haven't even practiced yet."

"Hmmm... maybe if you bought me-"

“Well, maybe we can find another drummer. I’ll miss you Nijika. You were like a sister to me.” Ryo sadly sniffed, a bit loudly for someone who’s supposed to be remorseful.

“Yeah, I figur- hey, you were gonna replace me?!”

Here they go again with their banter. Though a regular occurrence, she missed this.

Very nice.

“Hey Nijika.”

“Hmm?” Her voice still muffled as her face remained on the desk.

“The weirdest thing happened to me while I was here.”

“Ryo, I’ve seen a lot of weird things just from Bocchi-chan today. I don’t think whatever you say right now can top that.”

“Ok nevermind, that is weird.”

“Yup. And I lost...” Ryo groaned.

“Why are you fixated on that?”

Now it was Ryo’s turn to face-plant the desk. She felt Nijika try to comfort her as she felt her head patted. Whether out of pity or genuine care, she wasn’t sure. Maybe a bit of both.

“Still, it is odd how similar that cat is to me. The eyes, the cuteness, even initiating a staring contest with you!”

“I’m not so sure about cuteness, but yeah.”

“HEY!”

Ryo caught a glimpse of Nijika's pout, barely hearing a "I'm cuter than most cats...", before burying her face back into her arms.

Nijika's still kinda cute too.

"Oh, and the fact that I lost. That's a big difference."

"Alright tough guy, you think you're soooo cool, huh?" Nijika was enraged, slamming her hands onto the desk with renewed vigour. "You and me, right now."

Ryo glanced at Nijika, who was pumped up. Any past fatigue Nijika had was now gone. She was determined to win.

"Wow, really challenging me after I just lost?"

"Your fault for winning all the time!"

Ryo sat up and leaned back on her chair, crossing her arms with the most smug face imaginable. She can feel her deflated ego come back to life. Is this redemption? Another chance to reclaim her throne?

This will be a piece of cake. Like usual.

"Game on."

"U-uh, Kita-san. T-t-they've been staring a-at each other for a while now..." a stuttery voice rang from the bar as Hitori finished up memorising the layout for the 4th time. She had to make sure that the cola was on the second shelf, not the fourth.

"I know right? Maybe it's just something they do." Kita commented, leaning on her mop.

The two girls stood and spectated the staring contest. While Ryo managed to maintain her blank look, Nijika's fidgeting implied that

she was doing less better than her opponent. Both were really into the match though.

“They kinda look cute though, like a pair of owls!”

“Mmm...”

Kita sighed. “I wish I could stare at Ryo-senpai alllll day!”

“A-uh-eh me t-too?”

“You know what?” Kita turned to face Hitori, her aura full blast. “Why don’t we have our own staring contest? Surely we can beat them!”

“Uh-u-awawaweough-huheuhaugh...”

Hitori started to melt back onto the floor, with a pink puddle growing where she should be. Her stuttering and babble of incoherent sounds is what’s left that resembles her.

Kita giggled, before getting to work on rebuilding Hitori. “And we just got you off the floor.”

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

It truly was Ryo's fateful meeting with a cat, for this one cat will forever change Kessoku Band. At least, one would hope so...

Ayo, the sequel's here.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Turns out, that one meeting with that cat changed Ryo's life. Not surprising, considering how anyone can count the amount of things she does in life with their hands.

"Meoooow!"

"Oh, hey. Welcome back Nijicat."

Ryo knelt down as she began to pet the little furball that just let itself in Starry. Meanwhile, the real Nijika stood behind Ryo, with an irritated look on her face.

"Did you really name the stray 'Nijicat'?" she yelled.

Ryo stood and turned to face Nijika, which earned a small disappointed meow from the feline. With a dominant stance and her arms on her hips, full of confidence she nodded.

"Yes! Aren't I a genius?"

That got her a chop on the head. "Ow."

“More like a dork. How are you supposed to tell the difference between us?”

Ryo pondered, or at least pretended to.

“Niji-ka, Niji-cat. I don’t know what the problem is. Both are clearly different names. Except one is you, and the other is a well thought out pun made by the funniest member of Kessoku Band.”

Nijika stared. “Wow, I can’t tell which is which.”

“Really? Guess I need to explain the pun to baby Niji-”

Another chop, a bit more forceful than the last. “Oww.”

“Shut it, bassist. I was being sarcastic.”

“Hmm. Couldn’t tell.” Ryo replied sarcastically, rubbing her forehead.

“Meoow...”

“Oh right, Nijicat needs its cuddle time.”

Ryo got back to the real matter at hand, Nijicat, while Nijika just sighed.

“Just try not to make it shed any fur. You know my sister is deathly allergic to pets.”

“She’s not here though.” Ryo continued to give belly rubs to Nijicat, who had started to squirm on the ground in glee. She was genuinely glad to have bonded closer with the cat.

Maybe Nijicat can join Kessoku Band. We’ll have to teach it how to play something though... Mental note.

“You’re lucky she’s out to buy groceries right now.”

“Of course I’m lucky. I’m always lucky.”

“Don’t make me hit you again.”

“Ijichi-senpai, Ryo-senpai, we’re hereeee!” / “H-hii...” Kita and Hitori exclaimed their entrance to Starry, only to be met with a bizarre sight.

Ryo and an orange cat have begun to chase each other around the live house, each of them frantically yet gracefully weaving through the tables and chairs strewn across the place. They seem to be having the time of their lives, with the occasional taunt from the feline and the small giggles from Ryo. Both were even more astonished by how Ryo was able to keep up; they’ve never seen her move so fast.

And so, both stood by the stairs, mouths agape.

“Almost like you can’t tell who’s the cat and who’s the owner.” Nijika muttered, standing by the stairs with arms crossed, clearly annoyed at the current predicament.

“Ijichi-senpai, wh-what’s going on?” Kita asked, a puzzled look on her face.

“Oh hey Kita-chan, Bocchi-chan.” Hitori tensed at the fact that Nijika’s ‘Bocchi senses’ were still on point.

“Ryo found a stray and now they’re best friends.”

“Really? That’s so cool! Befriending a cat you just met!” Kita’s eyes sparkled in admiration.

“She even named it Nijicat.”

“L-l-like a pun of y-your name?” Hitori asked.

“Yeah.”

“As expected of Ryo-senpai! She’s so witty!”

Nijika grumbled as she turned to face the girls, lest she would witness more of the rambunctious duo scurrying around the live house.

“Look, I’ll need both of your help to clean the place up after they… finish. Don’t want Sis coming in and dying instantly.”

“M-Manager will **DIE?!?** ” Hitori shrieked, full of terror.

She can’t die! Then, there will be no one to take care of Starry! Well, Nijika could, but then she’d have to drop out of school. But she’ll be depressed from the death of her sister, and she’d do a bad job of running this place. And then we’d have nowhere to practise! Which means we’ll disband, and I’ll be left alone again! Worse, Nijika will have no one to support her and she’ll end up on the streets! She’ll get eaten up by the wildlife! Oh, the horror!

“Relax Bocchi-chan, I meant it as a joke. She won’t die.” Nijika said, scratching the back of her head. She didn’t mean to set Bocchi Time off.

Kita attempted to bring the overloading girl back to reality, shaking her gently by the shoulders, while the pink-haired guitarist continued to mumble about having to find appropriate clothing for a funeral and planning an expansion in their house for one more person. Her kind shaking turned more violent as Hitori’s mumblings continued.

“Ehh, Kita-chan? That might be a bit much..”

“Hitori-chan! Come back! She’s only allergic! She won’t die!”

Nijika just sighed. Again. With all things considered, this was quite normal for the band.

“Hey Ryo! You better not knock down any tables!”

Eventually, with the chasing pair tired out and Hitori back on Earth (accompanied with a thorough explanation of Seika's allergy), they all began to prepare Starry for customers. Well, minus an exhausted Ryo.

"Ryo-chan, y-you could help out a l-little..." Hitori softly said, sweeping strands of orange fur into a dustbin.

"Yeah Ryo. You made this mess. Makes sense for you to clean it up." Nijika added, wiping a table.

"Hnng..hah... heuh..." Ryo could barely respond, still breathless over her chase with Nijicat.

Geez, that cat is fast. I don't think I can stand up...

"Come on guys, be easy on her! She's tired out of her mind, let her rest for a bit. Isn't that right, Nijicat?" Kita mentioned, before directing her attention to the cat.

"Ah, K-Kita-san. Try not to get Nijicat to sh-shed more fur. I just cleaned there..."

"You and Ryo-senpai were so fast, weren't you? Who's a good kitty?" Kita began to give Nijicat cuddles.

She would've given the feline more scratches and pets, but Nijika swiped the cat from her, to Kita's dismay.

"Kita-chan, we can't have you make more of a mess. We still have practice, remember?"

Surprisingly, Nijicat is the first to respond with a meow of agreement.

"See, even Nijicat agrees."

"S..so you're ok..ay with the n... n... name...?" Ryo barely got out, still fatigued on the floor.

“Well, that is its name. Out of respect for its... owner.”

“Y... yay...” Ryo celebrated, before flopping back down on the floor.

“Someone get her off the floor before Sis comes back.”

The band got together to practise after cleaning up Starry. Seika managed to arrive just as they finished cleaning, so she didn't suspect a thing. Of course, they had to get Nijicat into the studio to prevent Seika's allergies from acting up. And...

“You haven't told Manager yet?” Ryo asked, voice still soft from fatigue.

“Why would I? She'd kill me!” Nijika replied, before adding a “I'm kidding Bocchi-chan, I'll just be in a load of trouble!” towards Hitori, who sighed in relief.

Thank goodness. I've been thinking about death a bit too much today...

So, they practised. Though they did not have any upcoming lives yet, they continued to practise regularly to prevent anyone getting rusty. With Ryo's body still aching, she sat down on a stool to play.

“I always have energy to play the bass. It's my specialty.” That got an eye-roll from Nijika, an obligatory “That's cool!” from Kita and a nod of agreement from Hitori.

Nijicat, however, was sleeping peacefully throughout the whole practice. Not the clashes of the drums, nor the strums of the bass nor even the strokes on both rhythm and lead guitars woke up the sleeping feline. It was strange. They felt bad for having to bring the cat into the studio since all of the noise they'll be making would certainly be bad for Nijicat. So to see said cat napping peacefully on a spare drum stool was relieving.

It seems Nijicat is used to the sound of bands. Interesting. Mental note.

“Nijika? Can you teach drums to Nijicat?” Ryo asked earnestly, unfazed by how goofy her question was.

“Wha- what do you mean by that? You’ve got me!” Nijika was baffled.

“I dunno. In case you get sick or something, we can still practise.”

“That’s a great idea! We won’t even realise that you’re gone Ijichi-senpai!”

“May-maybe we can search it u-up. Ma-maybe someone’s already d-done the research.” Hitori said, pointing to her phone with a search engine on the ready.

“Stop encouraging her!” Nijika was even more baffled.

A bit more practice and they were done for the day. Nijika told the guitar pair to go on ahead, saying that she needed to check on Ryo if she really was okay after all that running. She could barely stand right after her chase, so Nijika figured she’d need help with walking after practice. With a look of concern on both of their faces, both Kita and Hitori left the studio, leaving Ryo, Nijika and her feline counterpart in the room.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three. I’m not dizzy, Nijika. Just tired.”

“Ok good, just had to make sure. Don’t want you tripping while I help you walk.”

Nijika started to pack away the equipment in the studio, when Ryo spoke.

“Thanks. For... looking out for me.” Ryo said genuinely, one of the rare moments she wasn’t quipping or trying to be funny. “I haven’t

moved like that in, well, ever.”

“Oh, I could tell. Besides,” Nijika elbowed Ryo’s side, “we can’t have our bassist exhausted. We haven’t even gone big yet.”

“Touché. Although I’ll have to strike you for plagiarism.”

“I’d hit you, if you weren’t so frail right now.” Nijika placed a stool to the side, quite forcefully so the impact on the floor echoed through the room.

“Uhh. That’s... one way to put it.” Ryo felt a bead of sweat down her neck. She really couldn’t take another ‘Nijika chop’.

I’d actually disintegrate. Kinda like Bocchi.

“Still, there’s something off about you today.”

Actually, ever since Nijicat started to regularly come here, she’s been acting slightly weird. Just slightly.

“Ryo. It’s been a long day. Keeping this band together is harder than it looks.”

Nijika glared at Ryo.

“Especially with your antics.”

“What’s life without a challenge?”

Nijika just groaned.

“Ok, but seriously. I mean it. Are you that concerned for your sister’s wellbeing?”

“Uhh, yeah! She sneezes like crazy when she’s near pets! We can’t have something like that in this establishment!” Nijika says, a bit too enthusiastically.

Ryo raises her eyebrow.

“*sigh* Fine. There is something that’s bothering me. Dumb bassist. Making me have to talk about my feelings.” Nijika deflates on a conveniently-placed stool, opposite of Ryo.

A few seconds of silence pass, with Nijika fidgeting on her seat.

“It’s just the two of us. Shoot.”

“Meow!”

Nijicat was off its stool and now in the lap of Nijika, snuggling onto her skirt.

“You know what I mean.”

Nijika began to stroke its fur as she regained her composure, deeply breathing in and out. Though hesitation was in her voice, she spoke.

“My... my mom used to give me headpats when I was young. Whether I was feeling down or not, she would do it. She’d ruffle my hair sometimes, which was always a pain to fix.” Nijika laughed at her memory. “Of course, she always knew that, and so she’d spend more time brushing my hair. Sis never liked Mom’s headpats - with her already short hair back then, she would say something like: ‘Hey, don’t mess with it! I got a rock image to maintain Mom!’”

Ryo slightly giggled from Nijika’s poor attempt at recreating Manager’s voice. A smile began to grow on her face.

“A-after she passed... I never got something like that again. I remember asking Sis for one, but she refused, saying that I’m too old for it. I don’t think she got what I meant when I asked for one...”

Nijika was starting to tear up, and Ryo’s smile swiftly faded.

“I... It’s fine though. She does so much for me, I don’t want to burden her, y’know?”

“Nijika, it’s a headpat. I don’t think you’re burdening her with anything.”

“Yeah I know, it’s just... how I feel.”

Nijika paused, trying to recollect herself. The purring of Nijicat helped, and after a brief bout of silence, she continued.

“Seeing Nijicat being spoiled by you just reminded me of this. Not saying that you both are a bad thing! I’m glad you found Nijicat and that you both give each other happiness. It’s just... I want something like that too. Just like how M-Mom did it with me.”

Nijika wiped a tear, averting Ryo’s gaze.

“Sorry, I’m being childish. This is stupid.”

Ryo thought for a while. She didn’t think that the stress of being leader of Kessoku Band would get to her. Sure, on most days, even on the days filled with the usual hijinks, Nijika would be fine. After all, they’re all friends - Ryo knew she’d never trade in one of the members for someone else. But, Ryo failed to consider how much was stacking up on the poor girl. The other members didn’t really do much to check up on her; not out of a lack of care, but under the presumption that she was fine.

And so, she did what she thought was best. She placed her hand on Nijika’s head, a bit more forcefully than she’d like (her arm still aching)...

“Ow. I know I said it was stupid, but you don’t have to-”

... and started to gently ruffle her hair, as best she could. Ryo felt a bit guilty to have to mess up the drummer’s neatly kempt hair, but she knew this is what she needed.

“This might not be like your mom’s, but it’s close enough. I’m sorry for not noticing sooner.” Ryo said, with an apologetic yet soft smile

beaming at Nijika.

Nijika turned up towards Ryo. The angle of her arm on her head was a bit awkward, so Ryo adjusted before going back to patting the blonde.

“Now knowing how much you value headpats, anytime you need them, don’t hesitate to ask me. I’m sure the others won’t mind too, with all that you do for us.”

Nijika stared, a tint of red appearing on her face. She quickly turns away to hide the upcoming blush, which Ryo reacts with a stifled laugh. Her arm is still patting Nijika’s head.

“Th... thanks...” Nijika mutters, wondering why it’s gotten so hot in the room all of a sudden.

“Now that I think about it, you and Nijicat aren’t so different.”

Nijika’s face almost melts off in embarrassment. Ryo is surprised she doesn’t yell at her like usual. Both are unaware of the feline still on Nijika’s lap, content with what just happened.

Good thing I take care of Nijicat well. Nice one Ryo. Thanks Ryo.

“Thank goodness Ryo-chan’s there to t-talk with Nijika-chan.”

“Yeah! I had a feeling something was up with Ijichi-senpai.”

The guitarists peered through the studio door’s window, seeing Ryo patting a meek but happy Nijika. Out of concern for the drummer, both stayed to make sure she was okay. It appears that Nijicat is still with them, being pet by her human counterpart.

Hitori hesitates to speak her mind, but chooses to do so.

“I’m... uh-eh... I’m kinda jealous...”

“Wha-really?” Kita whips around to Hitori, having the introvert look away in embarrassment.

“Y-yeah. It must b-b-be nice.”

“Hmm... now that you mention it, yeah!” Kita ponders.

“Well, I can give you one right now!”

“Ahh-eh-uh-n..no need really! I’m fine! After all, why would you want to headpat me? A water flea? Whose hair probably smells like cotton balls right now? Yup, not a great smell to have on your hands, I bet! I’m a functioning human being! I don’t need headpats! I don’t deserve them anyways - what have I done to deserve one, right?” Hitori quickly blurted out, her volume pitching up and down sporadically.

“Oh, nonsense! I hug you all the time! This should be a piece of cake for you!”

Hitori held up her hands to defend herself from Kita’s assault.

“K-K-Kita-san! St-st-stay back! I-”

Kita’s hand was on her head. She can feel the slight calluses on her fingertips, yet her hand felt soft. Hitori felt like melting on the floor, but wanted more headpats, so she (mostly) kept her body solid.

“Heheh... ehehe... heh... hehe...” Hitori giggled, unaware of the goofy noises coming out of her mouth.

“Someone’s enjoying this, hmm? Who’s the coolest guitarist in the world? You are! Yes, you!”

Hitori couldn’t help but want more, with the praises and the headpats coming from the redhead. Unbeknownst to them, Nijika and Ryo were watching from the studio doorframe, with Ryo being supported by Nijika. Nijicat was hanging by Nijika’s free shoulder, also shocked at the sight of Hitori being petted.

“You know Ryo, you could learn a thing or two from both Bocchi-chan and Kita-chan.”

“You’re right. Let’s watch a bit longer.”

“Ugh, that’s not what I meant.”

Nijicat is now part of the band. I think. Hopefully I can think of ideas on how this new dynamic will affect the other bandmates; specifically the guitarists.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Hitori faces her greatest foe. Social human interaction. Good thing she's got a certain cat to help...

Chunk of notes at the end, so if you wanna read them, go ahead. Or don't. I'm not your parents.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“Guys? I know Ryo told you about it, but you both don’t have to headpat me...”

Upon arrival at the live house, Nijika was swarmed by the hands of her guitarists. Ryo had explained to Kita and Hitori about her likeness to headpats, which almost left both girls bawling their eyes out. They obviously both agreed to help out their leader in any way they can.

‘Ijichi-senpai does so much for us, let’s show her that we truly are united as a band!’ Her aura had blinded both introverts, but they were glad to hear her determination.

‘Y-yeah! She gave me a chance to finally play in a b-b-band. I won’t let her down!’ Hitori managed to say, pushing through her usual stutters.

Ryo was glad to have such caring bandmates.

Maybe a bit too caring though...

“Bocchi, Ikuyo. Chill. She just got here.”

“Hehe, sorry. Got a little excited...” Kita backed off and gave Nijika a slight bow.

“I-it’s ok Kita-chan. Although the words of praise are a bit much. I’m not a pet.”

“But they always work with Hitori-chan! Right?”

Kita turned to Hitori, but she was already on the floor, holding her guitar with the headstock towards her. She was... preparing to stab herself? With the guitar?

“Hitori-chan?!?”

“I am deeply sorry for such a horrible act that I have committed. Please, accept my humble apologies as I sacrifice myself to atone for such despicable deeds.”

“Woah. Pretty rock Bocchi.”

The stutter really goes away, huh...

“Bocchi-chan! It’s ok, I appreciate the sentiment. Really.” Nijika attempted to defuse the situation. To nobody’s surprise, this wasn’t the first time this happened.

“T-t-then let me p-play a ballad! To r-repay your kindness!” Hitori fumbled to hold her guitar properly, ready to shred like her life depends on it.

“Bocchi-chan. You don’t need to repay me anything as long as you’re here with us.”

“Yup! You’re a vital part of our group Hitori-chan, and don’t you forget it!” Kita added.

Such genuine, caring words finally snapped Hitori out of her Bocchi Time as she stood back up and slung her guitar back.

“R... right. Sorry.”

“Hmm...”

Ryo was deep in thought.

“Bocchi. Can you try doing that during our next live? We’ll get more fans that way.”

“Ahh-eh-uh-augh-ehh-huah... y-ye-sure?!?”

“I do have to agree with Ryo-senpai, it is rock! Though, we’ll have to fake it with fake blood...”

“Geez, the both of you. Where would y’all be without me?” Nijika shook her head.

With a stern telling from Nijika not to suggest something like that to Hitori (out of fear that she will actually do it - you never know what to expect from the pink-haired girl), the band got to work. It was a work day after all.

“Nijika. I’m still sore. Let me take a break until the end of today.” Ryo pulled out the cat-eyes while saying this, clearly learning this technique from a certain feline. She even wobbled her legs, nearly about to collapse on the ground.

“Oh, shut it. You were walking just fine without me!” Nijika saw through her lies.

“Pleeeeeeaaase? I have a cat to take care of.” Ryo was now on the ground. She weakly stretched out her arm towards Nijika.

Ryo-senpai can be such a drama queen when she want to...

“Ryo-senpai, while I am glad you take care of Nijicat very well, remember why we work. It’s so that we can keep playing here!” Kita said against Ryo’s pleas.

“M-mhmm! E-even if we might not li-like working...” Hitori piped in, reminiscing of all the times her social skills were put to the test.

“Speaking of said cat... where is Nijicat?” Nijika asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I dunno.” Ryo stood right up, her recent antics not persuading Nijika in the slightest.

“Some cat-owner you are.”

“I’m sure Nijicat’s on Earth.”

“Yeah, and the floor is made out of floor.”

“Great observation Nijika. Bonus headpats later.”

“HEY!”

Seeing the duo bicker was always entertaining to the guitarists, with the deadpan delivery of the blueberry-haired bassist and Nijika’s reactions being hilarious. Ryo and Nijika have known each other for so long, one would be surprised to know that they weren’t adopted siblings.

“You two are cute together.”

“Wha?” / “Huh?” The bickering duo snapped their heads towards Kita, hearing what she just blurted out loud.

“Hmm?” Kita was unsettled at the sudden attention, before realising what slipped out of her mouth. She flushed at the realisation. “Oh, I-I’m sorry! Didn’t mean to say that out loud...”

“I-I’m more cool than c-cute, but thanks?”

“Pssshh, o-of course I’m cute. But, cuter than Nijicat?”

Now everyone, minus Hitori, was blushing; all for their own reasons. Hitori giggled at the sight, a small smile growing on her face.

What friends I have. Friends, huh...

She was glad to have friends.

“I-I also agree. Both of you are like s-sisters.”

“Oh, I DO NOT want Ryo to be my sister. In any universe!” Nijika was very opposed to the idea, crossing her arms in a big X.

“C’mon Nijika, we can talk with my parents and your sister. You’ll only be doing slightly more chores than before.”

“Ugh, like you’d help!” Nijika scoffed. “Besides, you’re only onboard with the idea because I’ll be doing all of them!”

“I swear on my life that I will help. I have never broken a vow in my life.” Ryo said with conviction.

Nijika remained unfazed, staring daggers into Ryo.

Hmm, that doesn’t sound right.

“I have only broken at least seven vows in my life.” Ryo corrected with more conviction.

“All of them have been with me!”

“Ah-a-actually, two have be-been with me...” Hitori’s wallet was still wallowing in its emptiness. She really needed to get Ryo to pay her back.

“Point still stands!”

“... I'd be a better sister with Ryo-senpai...” Kita muttered, already blushing at the thought of living together with her beloved.

“I wish I could see a fraction of what you see in Ryo, Kita-chan. But, I just... can't!” Nijika sighed as she shook her head, clenching her fists.

“Well Ijichi-senpai, if you must know, Ryo-senpai is soooooooo cool! And...” Kita went on rambling about Ryo to Nijika, now with a bit of compliments to Nijicat sprinkled in. Nijika just stood there, almost having to shield her vision from the aura emanating from the babbling redhead.

As if to save Nijika from another paragraph about Ryo, the front door of Starry opened, revealing a certain orange furball, now adorning a red polka-dotted ribbon around its neck. Its previously-matted fur has been smoothed out, appearing much more fluffy for a stray cat.

“Ah. Nijicat is here.”

“Ryo! You gave Nijicat one of my ribbons?”

“Mhm. Isn't Nijicat cute?” Ryo petted Nijicat, who has magnetised to her arms.

“I have to say, it's gonna be a bit harder to distinguish the two.” Kita joked.

“Heheh, ehhehe, g-g-guess we'll have t-to tell t-the difference based on cu-cuteness.” Hitori added.

“And we all know who's cuter.” Ryo stroked the cat's fur in her arms. Nijicat meowed in agreement?

“Mmmmmmmmm...” Nijika grumbled, before adding a very quiet “I better get those extra headpats...”

The group all laughed at their weird conversation, before actually getting to work.

Aww man. I wish Nijika-chan was with me right now...

Hitori began to slightly vibrate behind the bar counter. She had been tasked to tend the bar while Nijika covered for her sister's absence. Nijika said that Seika was caught up with scheduling new bands for Starry back at their apartment, hence Nijika had to do her job while she was away. There weren't many bands playing today, so her work was relatively light. She still had to learn how Seika's job actually worked, and by the end of it she was brain-fried.

'This is what Sis does everyday?' Nijika mumbled, slumped over a table.

'Hmm, I always thought she just messed around on a spreadsheet until the day was over.' Ryo pondered.

'Ryo... ugh, nevermind.' Nijika bonked her head on the table, baffled at her friend's lack of a brain.

Speaking of the blue bassist, she was currently mopping one of the corners. Apparently, someone threw up on the floor, being allergic to one of the drinks. Neither Nijika nor Hitori knew, with the former having to reassure the latter multiple times (with some light shaking by the shoulders) that it wasn't her fault. Unusually, Ryo was up to clean it, which prompted Nijika and even Kita to ask if she was sure.

'Yup. We're all busy, and it's the least I can do.'

'It really is, huh.' Both drummer and guitarist said, expecting her to beg the group for free food later for her 'hard' work.

Kita was at reception - seeing how packed Starry was today, she was the best fit. And best fit she was, for she was in her element, holding up strong despite the amount of people coming in. Truly interacting with people was second nature to the extroverted girl. Though, the group did notice some people walking in with squinted

eyes, as if having to adjust to the dark atmosphere of the live house. It seems that her aura is not just something that they saw.

All this left Hitori manning the bar. Alone. Well, not quite alone.

“A-Ah, Nijic-cat. Dont sc-scratch my shoes. They’re my only p-p-pair.”

Nijicat was with her, somehow finding its way through the crowds and under the bar. It was currently clawing at Hitori’s shoes, having nothing better to do. This seemed to make the pink-haired girl’s vibrations worse as she tried to get the orange cat to stop. Of course, not in a direct way, for she doesn’t have a great track record with pets. Or with animals in general. She did not want to risk her life with Nijicat, and thought that if she moved just enough the cat would back off. However, if anything Nijicat proceeded to paw more at her shoes, probably thinking that they were some kind of toy.

“Excuse me? One cola please.” a stranger asked, placing his ‘guitar pick’ ticket to claim his free drink.

The bartender almost screeched at the sudden thrust into socialisation.

Oh no no no no no no. I’m not ready yet! I still need to warm up, do my breathing exercises, empty my thoughts, gather enough courage, remind myself on how to interact with people, double triple quadruple check that I know how to, and get Nijicat to stop scratching my shoes!

Said cat has finally stopped pawing at her shoes - to Hitori’s relief - and has begun to rub itself on her legs - to Hitori’s shock. She was about to explode right in front of the stranger, probably ultimately causing Starry to close down for good... when she didn’t do just that.

Huh? This is familiar... to when Jimihen would cuddle with me when I would be overthinking. It’s actually... quite relaxing. Yeah.

Now out of her spiralling thoughts, Hitori took a deep breath and tried her best to look into the stranger's eyes. After all, this surge of determination wasn't going to last.

Remember your training.

"C-c-c-coming ri-ri-right u-up!" Hitori managed to get out, with a shaky smile.

Cola's on the 2nd shelf, not the 4th. Don't look like an idiot. The ice is next to the sink. Don't look like an idiot. You know where the cups are. Don't look like an idiot. Black straws go with the plastic cups. Don't look like an idiot. Remember to smile again. Don't look like an idiot. Try to give Nijicat pets next time.

Across the room, her bandmates were hanging at Nijika's table. Ryo managed to clean the whole mess thoroughly (which would be normal if it weren't Ryo) and it was close to closing time, so both were able to rest by Nijika before cleaning up. Nijika was currently enjoying some much needed headpats from Ryo when Kita noticed Hitori.

"Hey guys, look!" Kita announced to the group as they huddled a bit closer to see where Kita was looking.

Nijika looked up to see Hitori actually interact with the customer. And not explode! Or melt! Or disintegrate!

"Woah! She's still intact. And..." Nijika squinted her eyes. "It looks like she's actually serving his drink!"

Indeed, their resident social anxiety trainwreck was managing the bar well. Perhaps a bit robotic in movement, as the group noticed that she was basically on autopilot while she pulled out the cola.

"And she remembered where the cola was!" Kita pointed out.

“Even I don’t know where that is.” Ryo commented, hand still planted atop of Nijika’s head.

“Ryo, you never tend the bar.”

She’s right.

“Oh. Right.”

“My, Hitori-chan has grown ever since we first met her huh?” Kita wiped a tear, happy to see Hitori doing her best.

“Kita-chan, you sound like her mom.” Nijika teased, colouring Kita’s face with the same colour as her hair.

“But yeah. She’s growing.” Nijika had a big smile on her face, seeing her friend come out of her shell ever so slowly. Even if said friend was currently stuttering as she handed the customer his drink.

“Woah. She didn’t spill. That Bocchi must be an imposter. I had a feeling she got replaced.” Ryo joked, although her small genuine smile betrayed what she said.

“Oh, shut it Ryo-Ow! Hey!” Nijika whipped her head around toward Ryo. “That hurt!”

“Sorry. Knot.” Ryo patted where she got hurt, calming down the drummer.

“I don’t have knots in my head though...” Nijika mumbled.

She’s right.

“Of course you do. It’s like a minefield back here.” Ryo lied.

“Hey, I take good care of my hair!”

“Augh-wah! Kita-san?!?”

“I’m so proud of you Hitori-chan!”

After the last customer left, Hitori could finally reunite with the band. Free from her prison of drink-serving responsibility, she now found herself in another prison. A prison bound by the arms of Kita. Truly a cruel fate for anyone found within them, for they would be blasted point blank with her aura. Although Hitori was slowly beginning to somehow like her hugs; whether it was from how frequent she’d do it or her lack of physical intimacy with anyone outside of her family. Sometimes, she dare may say, she kind of wants more?

Don’t melt, don’t melt, don’t melt, don’t melt, don’t melt, don’t melt, don’t melt.

Hitori began to melt in the arms of Kita.

“Ehh? Ah, I’m sorry Hitori-chan! Let me get you back to normal!”

“Bocchi-chan! Don’t melt away! What you did just now was amazing!” Nijika pleaded.

“Yeah. Pretty cool Bocchi.” Ryo stated with a thumbs up.

“Wha-wha-what did I d-do?” Hitori materialised back into her normal form, though still shaking in anticipation.

They’re congratulating me like I passed my exams or something...

“Hehe, weee!” Kita was also being shaken by Hitori, clearly enjoying the ‘ride’.

“What do you mean ‘what did I do’? You just successfully served a customer without our help!” Nijika exclaimed, raising her arms up in glee.

“Yup.” Ryo felt the need to approve whatever Nijika said.

“To be honest, I was kinda worried you wouldn’t be able to handle it without any of us. Today was one of the busiest nights somehow.”

Nijika scratched her cheek. "But, against all odds, you did it!"

"Yup."

"A-ahh..."

Guess I did. But...

"B-b-b-but I was kinda sh-shaking all o-over. A-and my smile probably weirded h-h-him out. A-a-and I put too much ice. Oh, what if he gets a brain freeze from m-my drink? Or what if m-my smile weirded him so much that h-h-he never comes a-again. And now that I think about it, maybe the cola was ex-expired. And-" Hitori rambled, before being shushed by Kita.

"Hitori-chan, stop that. None of that." Kita said with her finger on Hitori's lips. "What you did was a big leap. We're all proud of you."

Nijika gave a thumbs up while Ryo just nodded, the former with a big, goofy smile and the latter giving a small grin.

"... ok... Thanks guys..." Hitori softly spoke. "Ah, but I d-didn't do this alone."

On cue, Nijicat came out from the bar, meowing at its arrival. It didn't waste any time as it ran straight into Ryo's arms.

"Heh. I knew it. As expected from Nijicat." Ryo spoke like a proud parent.

"Yeah, yeah, but Bocchi-chan was still amazing today. A bit more progress and you'll conquer the world!"

"That too."

"Ehehehe, hehehe, thanks..." Hitori was now revelling in her new-found praise. "Hehehe, I think I-I deserve something Ki-Kita-san? Hehehehe..." She vaguely gestured to her head.

“Hmm? Oh definitely! You’ve earned it!” Kita released her hold on the pink guitarist and started to pat her head.

“You worked pretty hard today too, hmm?” Ryo said.

“Oh, well you already headpatted me, but if you want to give me more, then-”

“There, there. I’ll give you all the scratches you want Nijicat.” Ryo itched on Nijicat’s head, which earned her cute meows.

“What? Hey! I did more work than Nijicat! Right, Kita-chan?” Nijika turned to get some sort of approval from the redhead, but it was too late. She was already engrossed in spoiling the pinkhead.

“Someone’s bold tonight, hmm? Who’s conquering their social anxiety? You are! Yes, you!”

“Hehehehe, I’m bold....ehehehhe, t-that’s me, hehehehehee...” Hitori’s mouth spat out, before transforming into garbled nonsense.

With Ryo petting Nijicat for its ‘work’ and Kita spoiling Hitori, it left Nijika by herself. She could only just sigh.

“Guess I’ll just wait for my turn.”

Unbeknownst to Nijika, Ryo glanced at her, seeing her cross her arms and pout. She was probably waiting for both parties to finish.

Heh. It’s getting harder to distinguish who’s who between you and Nijicat. Mental note.

Don't worry guys, she got her headpats after.

Supposedly, I was planning to just write the whole thing, but seeing as how this ends off pretty nicely and stands well as its own chapter, I decided to post this. Do look forward to Chapter 3 (part 2)! It's a lot more heavy (?) than this.

Originally, this whole thing was supposed to be just the 1st chapter. I wrote this for fun, thinking how funny it would be for Ryo and a cat to have a staring contest. But because I wanted to write more (plus I'm like Bocchi fr fr and like the attention), it kinda continued. Plus, it's fun to see how Nijicat has settled into the group and somehow help them bond even better. Thanks to all who read, liked and commented!

I don't have a schedule for when I update this, so be on your guard I guess. Thinking of all of the goofy "what ifs" that I want to add does help with the writing process. Putting it into actual words is another story. I just write when I feel like it and then it somehow gets finished.

EDIT: OK. So, while writing I realised that Chapter 3 (part 1) is kinda its own chapter while Chapter 3 (part 2) is more like Chapter 4 part 1 and 2. Just changing the chapter titles to match. Chapter 4 (part 1) should be posted soon!

(part 1)

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 (part 1)

Something's bothering Kita. And Nijicat brings plague to an unfortunate Seika.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Another day of work and another walk towards work as both guitarists strolled through the streets of Shimokitazawa. It was usual for Kita to join Hitori on their way to work - after all, they go to the same school. At first, Hitori was petrified to have to exist even longer next to the extrovert. Over time, that has changed to comfortable familiarity where if the redhead wasn't walking with her, she'd probably call the police to file a missing person case.

Actually, that wasn't realistic. She would rush to Starry and get Nijika to do that, while she sat in a corner and attempted to not think of all the possibilities Kita had gotten herself into. And then Ryo would somehow save Kita from *[insert horrible circumstance here]* with the help of Nijicat. Yeah, that sounded about right.

Thankfully, Kita was always there to walk with Hitori. Minimal conversations made by Kita, responded with one-word responses or the once-in-a-blue-moon full on sentence from Hitori, as both girls swayed left and right from the weight of their guitars. Hitori wouldn't describe their walks as peaceful, with having to come up with a response or anything to talk about being a Herculean task to the poor pinkhead; but, she did enjoy the company. Instead of more time spent with her thoughts that would dread the upcoming work shift, she gets to listen about whatever Kita brings up. Be it about her day, how hard it is to play a certain chord or a recent song she listened to. She was mostly glad to just talk with her.

And as a bonus, Hitori gets to see a mellow Kita. She'd always be tired from the labours of school, so even as she talks with Hitori, her usual lighthouse aura dims to a warm glow like a nightlight. Even her peppy outgoing voice drops a tiny bit, saving her energy for when she needs it later. She finds talking with chill Kita better than usual Kita, though she'd never ever say that out loud. Eventually she'll get used to her at 100%. Eventually.

However, their stroll today was unusual.

Are we walking on a different road?

Hitori glances behind her and sees the usual metal fence they pass by.

Nope. We're on the usual road. Then, maybe the temperature is off?

She pulls out her phone to check the weather. Strangely, the redhead doesn't respond or notice at all.

Temperature seems fine. And the weather is typical for a work day. How about-

Hitori clutches her head.

Oh, who am I kidding? Kita-san is being totally silent! She hasn't said a word since we started walking and her greeting was slightly off!

Hitori looks over to Kita, who is still lost in thought. The thinking girl was matching Hitori's strides, though her slight gaze on the road hadn't left her face.

She's not even reacting to my freak out! Normally, she'd give me a light shake and tell me to stop overthinking, before tackling me with a hug. Which I don't mind not getting! At all! I can function well enough without the envelopment of Kita-san's arms around me. Yes!

Hitori shook her head. Now wasn't the time to think about her hugs. Or headpats.

Think, Hitori, think! What's up with Kita-san?

Now both girls were deep in thought.

Well, I could just ask her. Yeah, 'just'.

Hitori clenched her fists, silently thankful that Kita hadn't noticed her being weird.

You got this Hitori! It's just Kita-san, and yes she's acting a bit off. But! As her friend, you have to be there for her! You rely on her so much and now's your chance to show Kita that she can rely on you! Occasionally! That's better than nothing! C'mon, channel your inner Nijika-chan!! Rrrrrraaaaaahhhhhh!!!

"A-ah. Kita-san? Is s-something wr-wrong?"

Way to go. Nijika-chan would be proud.

"Hmm?" Kita was now out of her thoughts, seeing Hitori with a look of concern. "Oh, sorry Hitori-chan. Just have a lot on my mind."

It took a while for Kita to speak again.

"But don't you worry about me! My dumb thoughts will go away." Kita smiled, though it lacked its usual cheery flair. In fact, her smile almost seemed sad? Almost like she knew what she said wasn't true.

Hitori noticed that her warm glow was nowhere to be felt, replaced with something akin to a lighter's flicker. Kita's hands were fiddling with each other when she'd usually be swinging her arms to her sides as she walked with a skip in her step. It was hard for Hitori to keep up with the cheery girl, so it was strange that Hitori had to slow down for her, in case she accidentally bumped on a pole while she bore a hole on the ground with her gaze.

"O-o-okay. I also h-have dumb thoughts! A-all the time!" Hitori blurted in an attempt to make Kita feel better.

“Hitori-chan, don’t say that. I’m sure your thoughts are, err, cool? Creative?” Kita genuinely didn’t know how to describe Hitori’s thoughts. Or her thought process. Truly a one-of-a-kind.

“A-anyways, let’s hurry! I wanna pet Nijicat!” Kita grabbed onto Hitori as she essentially got dragged to the live house.

“Uhh-eh-ah-o-okay...” Hitori lacked the strength nor the courage to stop the other guitarist, and so she let herself get dragged.

Maybe this is for the best.

Upon arrival at Starry, the pair was met with the inevitable: Seika has gotten sick from Nijicat. Thankfully Nijika was there to tend to her sister, with Ryo distancing Nijicat away from the sisters in an attempt to help. The sick patient was currently wearing a double-layered mask, though that didn’t stop the sneezing. Her typical straight long hair was a mess and she looked like she hadn’t gotten any sleep.

“Ryo, you gotta discipline your cat. We can’t have Nijicat waltz in here all the time! Especially with Sis here!” Nijika scolded with a face palm.

“Nijika, it’s a stray. I can’t do much.”

Both Ijichi sisters glared at the bassist. Even while sick, the Manager’s gaze was threatening. Ryo can almost feel her upcoming paycheck get halved...

“W-well, I could try to teach Nijicat to wait outside rather than just enter.” Ryo stammered.

“Much better.” Seika croaked, before sneezing.

“Oh, Bocchi-chan, it’s all good! Just an allergy.” Nijika reassured the trembling guitarist, who currently had both arms slightly raised as if she was debating internally whether to help or not.

“And today’s another slow day. Apparently,” Seika sneezed, “all of the bands I scheduled are within this week. Except today.”

The group sighed in relief, the majority glad that the Manager isn’t leaving behind a load of work, while the minority glad to not have to interact with more strangers.

“But. I still need-achoo! Need people to keep this place tidy. And all that...” Seika mumbled, getting drowsy from all of the sneezing.

“Which is why I’ll be tasking both you and Kita-chan to take care of Starry while me and Ryo” Nijika gestured to Ryo, who recoiled a bit, “take my Sis back home to take care of her. Don’t give me that look Ryo.”

“But I don’t wanna walk even more...”

“This is kinda your fault, y’know? I’ll, **sigh**, I’ll cook for you even. Sis needs to eat home-cooked meals anyways to recover.” Nijika dreaded the amount of food she’ll have to make for Ryo. She ate as if she breathed food instead of air.

“Well, what are we waiting for? That food isn’t gonna make-I mean, Manager needs her rest.”

Nijika groaned as she helped her sister up the stairs, dragging Ryo in tow.

“Ugh, allergies suck... I put Starry in your care.” Seika entrusted to the guitarist pair.

“Don’t worry Manager, we’ll get it done! Starry will be just as you left it! Hope you get better!”

“Ah, y-yes Manager. We’ll try o-our best n-n-not to blow up Starry! Ehehehehe...”

“Eheheh, she’s kidding Sis. Mostly.” Nijika reassured her sister, whose heart almost dropped from what Hitori said.

“Bye Bocchi. Bye Ikuyo.” Ryo waved, before heading out with the sisters.

With the front door closed, Starry was now occupied by the guitarist pair. Void of the usual antics by Nijika and Ryo, the live house felt empty and quiet. A blanket of silence that normally wouldn't ever come filled the whole place.

“Ahh... guess we're alone for today, huh?” Kita finally spoke up.

“Y-yeah...”

“Hey, I'm still here!” PA-san piped up.

“Meow!”

Wait, what?

Hitori looked down to see the culprit of the allergy by her shoes, looking up at her with amber eyes. It seems it decided to stay with them rather than follow Ryo. That probably was for the best, seeing how Manager reacted to being near the presence of Nijicat.

“Aww, you got left behind. Don't worry, we'll keep you company!” Kita knelt down to pet the cat. “Besides, Manager isn't here and we can just clean up later.”

Hitori also knelt down, but not for Nijicat. She had to check if her shoes were fine. She did not want to have to buy another pair of shoes; well, it was more like having to get her family to buy her another pair.

Phew! Unscathed.

She sighed as she looked back at the front door.

I hope Manager gets better. She works so hard, not just for us.

“Hitori-chan, c’mon! Let’s try to teach Nijicat some tricks! It’ll surprise Ryo-senpai!” Kita called out, already trying to get Nijicat to do a backflip.

“A-okay...”

Maybe Kita-san is okay now. Yeah, probably.

After guiding her sister and dragging her bassist to the Ijichi household, Nijika wasted no time in getting the patient into her bedroom. She changed Seika’s masks, laid her down on her bed, made sure she was extremely comfy and got her a glass of water. Ryo brought in some allergy pills, as well as some headache and fever medicine. With her family being in the medical field, Ryo knew what would help her get better.

“If the temp isn’t to your liking, the AC remote is just by your bed.” Nijika said, placing the remote on the bedside table.

“Nijika, I’m not 12. I can take care of myself.” Seika groaned. “But... thanks.”

“Manager, with all due respect, you barely got here with Nijika’s help.” Ryo placed the medicine and pills next to her.

“I’d smack you if I could.” Seika sneezed. “Actually, Niji?”

“On it.” Nijika chopped the bassist on her head.

“Ow.”

I guess chopping heads runs in the family. Wait.

“Why don’t you go and make yourself useful, hmm? Make us some tea.” Nijika gave Ryo a wide smile, before shooing her away.

“And what will you do?” Ryo questioned.

“Sisterly bonding. You’ll just get in the way.”

“Akk! My heart! How can you be so cruel? The humanity!” Ryo clutched her chest, before falling on her back. The floor was met with a thump.

“Hey, don’t forget that I’m the one sick here. And I really would like some tea.” Seika snickered.

“Owww... you were supposed to catch me...” Ryo rubbed her back as Nijika helped her up.

“It’s less funny that way. And besides, laughter is the best medicine!”

“But Manager hasn’t laughed.”

“Hmm... maybe you should keep falling onto the floor. I’ll laugh eventually.” Seika joked.

“So what tea do you both want?”

Both sisters snorted.

“We only have one type of tea, Ryo. The tea bags are in the cupboard, next to the kettle.” Nijika instructed, before shooting her a salute.

“On it Commander Ma’am! I won’t let you down!” Ryo responded with her own salute. She then waddled out of the room.

“She’s such a dork. No wonder you like hanging out with her.” Seika giggled.

“Yep.” Nijika knelt by Seika’s side.

The two sisters talked: how the band is doing; small work stories (most of which consisted of Hitori) and the bands Seika scheduled for the week.

“Woah, that’s quite a lot!” Nijika was outstanced by how many more bands will be added to the usual list.

“Yeah. Achoo! Thanks for the tissues.” Seika blew her nose before continuing. “One step closer until Starry becomes famous. Which means more competition for you guys.”

“Bring it on! Kessoku Band never falters!” Nijika shouted, playfully boxing Seika.

“I think Ryo is rubbing off on you.”

“Oh no!” Nijika overly gasped. “That means I’ll... not pay my taxes! Or pay for lunch! The horror! I’ll have to live off grass for the rest of my life!” She held her hand on her forehead.

“Yeah, she’s definitely rubbing off on you.” Seika managed to say, trying to stifle her laughter.

After the sisters calmed down, they basked in comfortable silence. Nijika laid her head by the side of the bed.

“It’s taking Ryo a long time to get our tea. Surely she isn’t that lazy?” Seika mentioned.

“Nah. Maybe she tripped over the carpet. She’s got it.” Nijika said while waving her hand.

“But, it does make me wonder. What’s taking her so long?”

MEANWHILE...

I’ve made a grave mistake agreeing to this.

Ryo was given a simple task. So simple, she didn’t think anyone could mess it up. Well, maybe Hitori could if there was a stranger in the room. Or if Kita was watching.

Anyways, all she had to do was make tea. Simple. She headed over to the kitchen, which wasn't far from the bedroom. As an apartment just above Starry, the Ijichi household didn't feel spacious. Yet, it didn't feel cramped. There was just enough space for their stuff and minimal decorations whilst maintaining its spacious-ness. Still, each of the rooms were close to each other, which Ryo really liked. Maybe that's why she kept coming here. Oh, and the free food.

Ryo found the cupboard Nijika told her about, being slightly opened. Peering in, she could see part of the comically-large stash of green tea bags in there. The sisters were really fond of their green tea, both drinking for the heat and the blandness of it. She guessed that they didn't want to think about restocking from time to time, and since tea doesn't expire fast they just bought a bucket load to call it a day.

It's kinda funny if you think about it.

She'd laugh out loud, weren't for the glaring elephant in the room that was the only thing in the way between her and the tea. The small, brown, disgusting elephant.

What's with animals and bugs making a fool out of me? Mental note.

A cockroach stood in the way. Of course, it was normal for apartments to have bugs, especially during the summer where they all come out to play. Ryo thankfully lived in a wealthy house, so bugs were a rarity. Though, whenever one would appear, usually a cockroach, her mom would freak out. Screaming, flailing her arms, running around the house like a chicken, shaking Ryo vigorously to help. Then, her dad would step in and cautiously spray the brown gremlin with bug spray, where it would try its hardest to live. It was quite horrible to watch it slowly die, a large part because it tries to go everywhere while doing so. Consequently, her mom would scream even more.

While she'd like to think she was indifferent to them, she didn't realise that her mom's stance towards them would carry on to her.

So, she was absolutely horrified. She did not move a muscle as she watched it stand by the cupboard, as if guarding its contents.

Ryo hated to pull a Bocchi, but she had her back against the wall.

I can't just go back and ask Nijika where the bug spray is. Both of them will make fun of me, and it'll ruin my cool image. But I can't try to find where it is - I'll risk making the cockroach here move. And I DO NOT want to find out if it can fly.

Ryo thought harder.

Maybe, I don't need the spray. If it moves away from the cupboard, I can just sneak and snag the tea. Lukewarm tea isn't so bad. I'm sure I can come up with some excuse. 'The power socket for the kettle sparked.' Yeah, something like that. Nice one Ryo. Thanks Ryo.

As if it heard her thoughts, the cockroach inched closer to Ryo.

"Eek!" Ryo screeched uncharacteristically, diving behind the couch.

Oh geez, hopefully they didn't hear that. I wish Nijicat was here. Then I can send it to battle while I get the tea.

Ryo peeked over the couch to find that the cockroach... was gone?

"Huh?" she said out loud, perplexed that something so big and atrocious can just disappear.

It could be anywhere! I have no time to lose. It's now or never.

With a determined yet anxious look, Ryo rolled along the floor and booked it for the cupboard. She swiped two green tea bags, two mugs from the drawer (as she sighed with relief to not find the brown menace there) and started up the kettle. She kept shooting glances behind her to check for the cockroach, in case it crept up behind her. With a knife.

ding!

The star aligned as the tea was ready, with the cockroach nowhere to be seen. Ryo prepared the two cups of tea, ready to be delivered to the sisters.

Hopefully they don't mind me taking this long. Maybe in the near future I can explain to Nijika. She'll-

Her thoughts were abruptly stopped as she nearly dropped the cups. There it was. Blocking her from going back to the bedroom. She couldn't scream again, now being very conscious of her volume, so she instead slightly shuffled and let out a slight gasp. Her shuffling accidentally made her spill a drop of tea onto the cockroach, who ran away.

*That's right. Burn. **BURN.***

With safe passage restored, Ryo headed back to the bedroom. She found Nijika to be suspiciously close to the door, while Seika had her hand clasping her mask. Perhaps she was trying not to sneeze again.

"I'm back."

"Does it really take that long to make tea?" Nijika replied, with a hint of laughter in her voice. She took the mugs from her hands as she handed Seika one.

Did I miss on a joke?

"Yup. Tea like that takes time. Perfection."

"Y'know, Ryo. There's a reason, heh, why I don't practise drums here." Nijika ignored her retort. Now she was just trying not to laugh.

"Uhh, there's no room for a drum set here Nijika."

"Bwahahaha, she doesn't know! Hahahahaha!" Seika bursted out laughing, sneezing in consequence.

“Yeah, we heard eeeeeverything. The walls here are quite thin.”
Nijika smirked.

It took Ryo a second to process what she just said. Her face flared up in bright red.

“A-ah.”

“Hahaha, don’t worry Ryo. I won’t spill to Bocchi-chan and Kita-chan. Wouldn’t want your image to be tainted.” Nijika laughed as she gave Ryo a pat on the shoulder, while Seika continued to giggle in the background.

Ryo flopped on the floor, now in a fetal position. Never in her life did she want to disappear and not exist, the embarrassment unbearable to her. She now understood how Hitori felt.

“Ryo, get off the floor. You’re starting to remind me of Bocchi-chan.”
Nijika tugged on Ryo’s sleeve, but she did not budge.

“Ehehehehe, it’s still out there... hehehehe...” Ryo was broken.

“Oh geez Niji, look what you’ve done.” Seika taunted.

“Me? You’re the one who laughed at her!”

“Now, now. Let’s not point fingers.”

Will Ryo ever recover? How about Kita - is she alright? Is there gonna be more Nijicat? Find out in the next part of Chapter 4!

Originally was going to be longer with part 2 included, but seeing as how this makes a good part 1 for Chapter 4, I’m posting it. It is quite short compared to the other chapters, but I think it’s best if I get this out right now. I also just remembered that PA-san exists, so sorry to all of the PA-san fans out there. She’s gonna be included in the next part, don’t worry.

Look forward to Chapter 4 (part 2)!

p.s: Other writers, pls feel free to include Nijicat (or any cat in general) in your stories. I wanna read more Bocchi stories with a cat in it.

(part 2)

Chapter 5: Chapter 4 (part 2)

Kita and Hitori spend time with Nijicat. Nijika and Ryo beat each other up. And Seika's still sick.

Woah, so soon?!? Notes at the end if you're interested.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Spending time with Nijicat was relaxing to the guitarists, even to Hitori. Even though she had to distance herself from the cat from time to time as it still wanted to play with her shoes, she was having fun. They managed to teach Nijicat some basic tricks: sitting, rolling on the floor, playing dead - Hitori almost called for an ambulance when Nijicat played dead a bit too well, which Kita had to reassure the poor pinkhead that Nijicat was fine. And, they started to somewhat train Nijicat to wait by the entrance. Well, more like leaving food and water at the entrance for Nijicat to have. A quick search online told them that food is a great method for teaching animals.

'This u-usually works with Jimihen...' Hitori said. Honestly, it was mostly Futari who taught the dog all it knows. The duo were inseparable.

PA-san was able to join in the cat action, with nothing much to do during the free day. She gave pets and cuddles, before monologuing how lonely she was at home. Both guitarists guessed that Nijicat reminded her of her lack of friends and family, with Kita suggesting to her that she should adopt a cat. She surprisingly declined, stating

that taking care of her dear potted plant at home was enough. She went on to explain in precise detail how spoiled her plant was, with the guitarists amazed and slightly weirded out. Maybe she needed to go out more often.

Will I turn out like PA-san if I didn't meet Kessoku Band???

Hitori shook away her thoughts as she joined Kita by the bar. They sat on the bar stools, having exhausted all fun activities with Nijicat. Said cat was also tired, opting to snuggle up on a stool.

"I-it's kinda weird to have all t-this free time, huh Kita-san?" Hitori commented, sipping on some coke she made. Doesn't hurt to have some drinks while the sisters were away. She glanced around to check for any cameras before taking another sip.

"Yeah! I..." Kita trailed off, before continuing, "Uhh, I kinda needed this break. Not saying that I wanted Manager to get sick!" She waved her hands in defence.

"Hm? W-why's that?"

"Well... eh... so... well it's..." Kita struggled to articulate what she wanted to say. Hitori had to blink to check if she was looking into a mirror.

"A-a-are you still t-thinking about, ah, err, well, whatever i-it is you were thinking about?" Hitori asked, internally cringing at how vague she sounded. It's not like she knew what Kita was thinking.

"... kind of..." Kita meekly muttered.

"Pl-playing guitar h-helps me stop o-overthinking. Y-you wanna practise? Ah, only if y-you want to. We d-don't have to d-do it!" Hitori offered, before backpedalling hard.

"Someone's bold today." Kita teased. "It's ok Hitori-chan, let's practise! Ah, but maybe we should clean up first."

“O-okay.”

So the pair started to tidy up Starry, being a bit messy as they made a mini obstacle course for Nijicat - which the cat actually never ran through, but the guitarists and PA-san found the course cute. PA-san joked that Hitori should run the course so that it wouldn't go to waste, which she actually considered doing, before being dragged away by Kita to clean the course up. Hitori was almost disappointed when she realised how she would probably mess up with her noodle arms and legs.

Hitori kept glancing at Kita, finding her to have the same face she had while they walked to Starry. It was weird to see a contemplative Kita, reminding Hitori of herself. She shuddered in thought.

Wait, what if she's thinking about our upcoming practice? What if that won't help her get rid of her thoughts? Great job Hitori, you just had to blabber your mouth and try to make Kita-san feel better. Now you're gonna make it worse! Adding more worry to her, what were you thinking? And it'll be awkward to change your mind now! Oh no, then she'll start to hate playing guitar because of her teacher. And then she'll quit the band! Nijika-chan will kick me out for kinda kicking Kita-san out, and then the band will dissolve. All because of me!

Before spiralling even further, something fluffy grazed her tracksuit. Looking down, Hitori found Nijicat, who meowed. It was as if the spirit of Nijika was within the cat, calming the pinkhead down. Hitori smiled.

“Th-thanks. A-eh-n-not the shoes again please...”

Right. Kita-san is thinking too hard. What that is, I don't know. It's not my fault, but I gotta make her feel better! I have to show her that she can rely on me, like how I rely on her. A bit too much...

She set herself on track by lightly slapping her face, which elicited a confused look from Kita.

“Something wrong Hitori-chan?” Kita asked.

“Ah, Nothing, nothing. J-just Nijicat trying to sc-scratch my shoes again.” Hitori slightly pushed Nijicat away, who whimpered. It really liked her shoes. Especially with its scratch marks on it.

“Hehe, Nijicat really likes them, huh?”

“I-I wish it didn’t.” Hitori sulked. Having to hide the scratch marks was getting harder. She was very close to having to buy a new pair.

“Anyways, we’re pretty much cleaning up. You can bring Nijicat in the studio with you, I’ll check with PA-san to make sure everything’s good to use in the room!”

“Ah, okay.” Hitori picked Nijicat up. She tried not to vibrate in fear, so as to not startle the feline.

“Hey, you can try to teach Nijicat how to play the drums while waiting for me!” Kita joked.

“A-alright. I won’t let you down!” Hitori rushed into the room to start practising.

“What?” Kita turned to see Hitori gone, with the studio room door slamming shut. She could see Hitori struggle to get Nijicat to hold a drumstick as the cat had a face of pure confusion.

“She took it seriously, huh?” PA-san mentioned. “Isn’t that like her?”

“Yeah.” Kita turned to PA-san. “Is everything good to go?”

“Yup. Been that way ever since Hitori mentioned ‘practice’. You two speak quite loud.” PA-san slyly grinned.

“Oh, right. Guess it was pretty stupid to ask you. Heh...” Kita dryly said.

PA-san frowned. It was weird to see Kita like this.

“Are you alright Kita-chan? You seem dimmer than usual.” PA-san asked.

“Huh? Dimmer? Maybe it's the new makeup I'm using? It is a bit darker than my normal-”

PA-san shook her head.

“That's not what I meant.”

“Umm... the lighting in here seems different. Did Manager get new lights or something?” Kita beated around the bush.

“Nope.” PA-san was now peering into the redhead, who started to squirm under her gaze.

“Haha... w-well, we played with Nijicat for quite a while. Worked up q-quite a sweat, right? I am a bit tired from all that.” Kita wiped her forehead to emphasise. It didn't seem to work on PA-san.

PA-san shook her head again. She then vaguely gestured around her, which made Kita raise an eyebrow.

Right, she probably isn't aware of her own aura.

“Silly. I'm saying that you seem less bubbly than usual.”

“O-oh...” Kita looked down at the floor in embarrassment. “That easy to notice?”

PA-san hummed in agreement. As obvious as it was to anyone who knew Kita, she didn't want to hurt her feelings.

“Even while we were playing with Nijicat, I could tell. Bocchi-chan did too. It's probably why she suggested to practice.”

“Really?” Kita looked up.

“Mhmm. So go. Loosen up a little and have fun there!.” PA-san waved Kita off, before adding “Oh, and don’t do anything you’ll regret!”

“Huh? We’re just gonna practice PA-san.”

“I feel like Bocchi-chan might want to talk with you too.” PA-san placed her hand on the guitarist’s shoulder. “Running away from your problems won’t help Kita-chan.”

PA-san gave a reassuring smile to Kita, who returned a tired smile.

“Thank you PA-san.” Kita wiped a forming tear. “Eh, but why don’t you talk with me about it?”

“Oh, I don’t handle that kinda stuff well. I live alone and take care of a potted plant, remember? I don’t know how to have talks like that.”

Kita laughed awkwardly.

At least she’s self-aware about it...

“Besides, you two are cute together.” PA-san teased, which came out of left field to Kita.

“Wha-well... yeah we d-do! Bye! Thanks again!” Kita managed to salvage, shuffling towards the studio and waving to PA-san. She hid her face to hide her spreading blush on her face.

With the door closed, PA-san shook her head.

“I have confidence in you Bocchi-chan.” PA-san muttered to herself, before heading to the bar for a drink. She’d deal with Manager later.

With the door closed, Kita turned to see Hitori right up in front of her. Her heart almost leapt out of her throat as she suppressed a scream. She looked to the side of Hitori as she saw Nijicat sitting on the drum stool, behind the drum set. It still had the same face of confusion.

“Kita-san! I-I don’t know much about d-drums, but Nijicat just played the s-sickest drum solo! C’mon N-Nijicat, play it again...” Hitori gushed to Kita, losing confidence as she spoke. She prodded Nijicat to hit the drums, slap the cymbals or do anything really. The ‘drummer’ cat stared at Hitori, somewhat dumbfounded that she believed for a second that a cat could ever play the drums.

“You’re kidding, right?” Kita stifled a laugh. She can clearly see through the lie.

“Y-yes. Sorry, just w-wanted to make you feel better...” Hitori deflated. Nijicat meowed in agreement.

“Hitori-chan, you being here makes me feel better.” Kita said, with Hitori blushing at the compliment. “Now come on. Let’s practise.”

“Ryo, can you not?!?” Nijika yelled.

“Not so loud Niji, I’m still here.” Seika rubbed her eyes, groggily watching the two.

It was fortunate that Ryo could be bribed into doing anything with enough food. So, while Nijika prepared a home-made meal for her sick sister, she took time making a somewhat full course meal for Ryo, who was still on the bedroom floor. It wasn’t grand by a longshot, considering the Ijichi fridge didn’t contain anything fancy. However, Nijika was able to make it, with appetisers and dessert included. All in an effort to get the blue blob to get off the floor.

‘Ryoooo, I made you some food. A-a lot of food actually. Please get off the floor!’ Nijika said, holding her food on a tray. She really did went all out for Ryo.

‘Is... is the cockroach still, y’know, out there?’ Ryo almost whispered, looking up at Nijika. She looked like a sad kitty. Except if the kitty was huge. And broke.

'Nope, it won't hurt you. C'mon, this delicious food won't eat itself!'
Nijika poked at Ryo.

In an instant, Ryo was now sitting at the dining table, practically inhaling what Nijika cooked. Nijika really didn't want to have to waste all that food for Ryo, since it probably was encouraging her to continue her rotten behaviour of not paying for her meals. But she also really needed her off the floor.

She was scarily close to having a Bocchi Time moment...

With a crisis averted and a now full Ryo that's kind of back to normal, Nijika cleaned up the table while sending Ryo back to the bedroom. Nijika actually wasn't sure if the cockroach was truly gone, so if it appeared again to spook Ryo, she actually might explode. Sure, Nijika had experience in dealing with, uhh, 'exploding people' - she was basically a professional from all the times Hitori exploded. But from Ryo? That'd be weird. And she didn't want the poor girl to suffer yet again, from both shock and embarrassment.

Once they were both back in the bedroom, they realised that they had plenty of time to kill. Seika was currently sleeping, hugging her stuffed panda under her blanket. They couldn't practise or do anything loud, so Nijika suggested that they play some Super Smash Ultimate on her Nintendo Switch. They still needed to be in the room so that Nijika can watch over Seika to make sure she gets enough rest. Nijika also wanted to cheer Ryo up, seeing as she was still slightly shaken from her cockroach meetup.

And so here they were, playing Smash. The continual shouts of frustration from Nijika woke her sister up, as she watched them beat each other up. In a video game.

"Ryo, **PLEASE** stop playing the dumb alligator." Nijika said to Ryo, fuming at the amount of times she's lost.

"1 to 9. Why should I? Also, K. Rool is a crocodile." Ryo flatly stated. She was back in her element and winning by a landslide.

“I don’t care! He has, like, five different armour moves! And projectiles! So annoying!” Nijika seethed, recounting how often she’s died to the cannonball.

“Buuuut, he’s chonky. You should be able to hit your combos easily, considering you’re playing as Pikachu.” Ryo pointed out.

“She, **yawns**, she does have a point Niji. This might just be a skill issue.” Seika comments, now sitting up.

“No it is not! I refuse to believe so! Also, hey! You’re supposed to be on my side!” Nijika points at her sister.

“Sorry Ryo about Nijika. She’s kinda competitive with this stuff.” Seika ignored her sister’s remarks. “She grinds at it during her free time here at home.”

“It’s cool. Makes it fun to fight against her.”

And it’s kinda cute. Nijicat’s got proper competition now.

“Ugh, fine. Short break. Then I’ll make you regret you ever played King K. Rool.” Nijika threatened Ryo, glaring at her.

“Ok.”

“You know, in hindsight, playing Smash probably wasn’t the best thing to do with me sleeping here Niji.” Seika mentioned.

“Yup.” Ryo agreed.

“Yeah, yeah. And hey Ryo. Why didn’t you stop me? Or suggest something else for us to do?” Nijika asked.

Ryo just smirked.

Oh, you know why.

“Ugh, whatever...” Nijika muttered.

Nijika sat up and stormed off to get some water. She needed to cool down after being subjected to torture via Ryo.

At least she feels better.

Nijika sighs.

But now I don't!

"Oh yeah Sis, how are you feeling?" Nijika returns, handing a glass of water to Ryo.

"Much better. The sleep worked like a charm." Seika sips at her tea, then scrunches her face at how cold it has become. "Though I definitely can't go back to Starry. All the sneezing really kicked the wind out of me."

"You're getting better. That's all that matters." Nijika smiled at her sister. "You should probably stick to watching us rather than play. Your sneezing might come back."

"Yep. Besides, I don't want to fight against Ryo."

"So you admit it?!?" Nijika yelled, before sighing and turning to Ryo, hardening her expression.

"Why don't you just play your main, Sonic? At least that's a sorta fun fight."

"Mm. Not as funny as big crocodile with a gun." Ryo deadpanned, taking a sip from her water.

Ryo's usual character of choice was the blue blur himself. With how similar their coolness (in Ryo's eyes - Nijika did not find her that cool) and strong sense of sticking to their own ways, it was a perfect match. She was a big advocate of the 'anti-camping' playstyle, recommending numerous montages on YouTube to Nijika when she asked about it. On the other hand, Nijika tended to switch between Pikachu and Pichu. She liked their small sizes yet devastating

combo game. And she found both of them cute. Seika found it funny how they chose characters that matched their hair colours, which the gaming pair didn't realise until she pointed it out to them.

"Aw, c'mon! Pleaaaaase?"

"Nah." Ryo smiled. She was enjoying every second of this.

This is payback Nijika.

"Fine. Best to 12." Nijika sat back down, determined to bring down the blue menace playing the green menace. "But I get to play my REAL main."

Nijika chose a yellow Inkling as her character.

"Like that's gonna make a difference?" Ryo sassed as she picked K. Rool again.

"Oh, now you're on!"

Will Kita finally tell Hitori what she's been thinking about? And will Nijika finally beat Ryo? Find out in the finale of Chapter 4!

Ok, I know I kinda eluded that part 2 would be the final part for Chapter 4. However, I find this chunk I finished to fit as its own part. Personally, I find it ehh to have a chapter split into multiple parts, mostly because of how short the parts tend to be, but seeing as college is about to start (also hey, I go to college. 1st year), might as well post this. This means that while I'd like to think that part 3 will come out soon, don't be too shocked if it gets delayed.

Surprisingly, I enjoyed writing PA-san in this. She's fun. Also, I found it fitting for Ryo to main Sonic in Smash. Those two are pretty similar if you think about it. Sorry to those who don't play Smash to get what Nijika yelled about - just know that King K. Rool is very, very, very annoying to fight against.

As always, thanks to all the likes and comments (even if I don't reply,
I am Bocchi fr fr)!

Chapter 4 (finale)

Chapter 6: Chapter 4 (finale)

Practice doesn't go well as Kita confesses. Nijicat's there to help. And Hitori, I guess.

Hopefully the build-up has been worth it.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Without the whole band together to run through songs, the guitarist pair decided to have a usual guitar lesson. Not being confined under a staircase in the corner of their school and with actual functioning amps, they can let loose without having to worry about any distractions. It was quite liberating to Hitori, despite the recluse used to small, homey spaces. And not just the room; the act of playing her guitar felt relaxing. She could always lose herself in the strums as her anxieties melt away. It was a big part of why she can always step up on stage with the rest of Kessoku Band, her guitar bringing her immense comfort and courage.

There were also her friends, who have been pushing her to improve both as a band member and as a friend. Nijika, Ryo and Kita all have been such blessings to the young girl's life - not that she'd ever have the courage to say that to them. Slowly she was getting used to the norms of having friends, battling it out with her social anxiety almost on a daily basis. It will take time, lots of time realistically, for her to knock her worries out of the ring. But as long as she has her support, she'll get there. One step at a time.

Hitori wondered why she was being so... reflective? Wasn't she teaching Kita how to transition smoothly from chord to chord?

Oh right. She's been stuck on the same two chords for the past ten minutes.

Hitori looked across her to see Kita, struggling to get the two chords to play. She knew Kita was better than this. Way better actually - this was the same Kita that pulled out an improvised solo when Hitori's guitar string snapped! But perhaps Hitori's plan to make Kita feel better wasn't working. She silently was thankful that they didn't have band practice.

"Ugh. I just had it!" Kita grumbled after her hand slipped, making the chord not ring out.

"K-K-Kita-san. M-maybe we can practise s-something else?" Hitori weakly raised her arm to Kita, trying to stop her from brute forcing even further. "Y-you've been at it for a while n-now."

"I know I have! I should get it! It's just," Kita snapped, clenching her free hand, "stupid **CHORDS!**"

Hitori flinched away from Kita's outburst. Yeah, practice really wasn't the way to go. If anything, it seemed to make things worse.

Kita saw Hitori, and pinched the bridge of her nose. Now she was scaring her.

"I'm, I'm sorry Hitori-chan." Kita sighed. "You know that I should be getting these right."

Hitori nodded.

"Then I have to do better." Kita grunted. "For the band."

"... b-but, you're already pretty g-good. Y-you aren't at 100% t-today. A-a-and that's ok! B-but don't be too h-harsh on yourself if you c-cant play a-any well today." Hitori tried to console the disgruntled

redhead. Though she felt slightly hypocritical saying this, she felt like Kita needed to hear this.

“But what if we do play and I’m not at 100%? You” Kita pointed at Hitori, “can get away with that, with how cool you are on guitar, but me?” Kita pointed at herself, “I can’t. And if we want Kessoku Band to reach stardom, then I have to get a grip on myself!”

Hitori was puzzled by what Kita said. Never has she seen a Kita not without a full-blast aura at the ready, except today. She really didn’t think Kita had to worry about that.

She’s too happy, too bubbly, too... Kita-san to be like this.

“Kita-san, you’ll g-get to my level someday. M-maybe even sooner. But p-please. Don’t be too hard on yourself.” Hitori said.

Kita’s gaze lowered to the ground as the shadow from her hair covered her face. A tactic that Hitori would do to deal with her anxieties, that did not fit on Kita to Hitori. At all.

“Hitori-chan.” Kita said, voice full of despondence. “You know I’m the weakest link in the band.”

“H-huh?”

“Ryo-senpai makes our music and plays bass really well. She’s always so confident and cool. Ijichi-senpai is amazing on the drums, keeping us in rhythm. And she’s our leader! She does so much to keep us all together.”

Kita looks at Hitori through her hair, her usual bright emerald eyes muted and lost of their shine. Hitori almost gasps at the sight.

“Hitori-chan, you...” Kita pauses. “You’re amazing. Years of guitar experience, able to come up with anything on the spot! Your lead guitar inspires anyone who listens!”

“Ehehe, t-thanks...” Hitori got sidetracked and almost melted at the praise, before Kita continued.

“And then there’s me. Vocalist and rhythm guitar. Anyone can sing, and I don’t even do the latter well.” Kita sank deeper on her seat.

There was an uneven pause, with Hitori unable to say anything. What was she supposed to say? Her mind was blank. She then heard Kita softly sob.

“I... I don’t want to lose this. What I have with you all. This is the first time I’ve ever been so...” Kita wiped her tears, “so passionate in anything. Never have I been so confident that this IS my life’s calling. And yet here I am, messing it up. Like I always do with everything.”

Kita looked up at Hitori. She could barely make out Hitori’s shape with tears in her eyes.

“W-why am I like this, Hitori-chan? Even in the place where I truly belong, why do I still mess up?” Kita desperately begged Hitori for an answer. Her voice trembled.

Hitori froze. This was way heavier than she thought. But she had to answer. Kita needed her to answer.

Usually when I doubt my place in the band, it’s always because I have trouble seeing my own self-worth. But thanks to everyone, I’ve slowly learned that it’s just my anxiety speaking. Is that what Kita-san is going through? Kita-san... has anxiety. Like me?

She didn’t want to accept that. Kita, resident glowing ball of sunshine, was also susceptible to the grasp of anxiety? No way! Right?

...

Perhaps her image of Kita needs to be adjusted.

Hitori spoke, soft but genuine.

“W-who says Nijika-chan doesn't mess up? Or Ryo-san? We all m-mess up Kita-san, though i-it's obvious when I mess up... But! B-but. That's ok.”

Hitori turned to look at her shoes. She couldn't deal with Kita's longing gaze on her. Not while she needed to make her feel better.

“I-uhh. I'm still trying to a-accept that i-it's ok to m-mess up. I m-mean, when I first met Nijika-chan, I-I couldn't play on time with t-them. I had to play in a ca-cardboard box the first time we went l-live.” Hitori got out, before muttering, “That memory still h-haunts me...”

Hitori shook her head and looked at Kita, determined to get her point across.

“I'm-I'm saying that y-y-you need to learn that i-it's ok too. To mess up. Yeah...” Hitori slightly sagged.

Maybe what I'm saying isn't enough. Oh, how I wish Nijika-chan was here! Or even Ryo-san! They'd do a better job than me! Now Kita-san's gonna think I don't make any sense and-

She couldn't finish her thought as she got tackled by the trembling redhead. Kita began to sob into her tracksuit as Hitori eventually returned the hug. She even pushed herself to rub Kita's back, moving her hand in small circles. The small tear stains in her tracksuit didn't matter to her. She just wanted Kita to let it all out; an unfamiliar feeling to the pinkhead, yet it didn't feel foreign.

“Th-thanks Hitori-chan...” Kita mumbled as she calmed down, still holding tight onto Hitori. “I'm being stupid again.”

“D-don't say that.” Hitori said. “T-then I'd also b-be stupid.”

“Huh?” Kita was flabbergasted.

“A-oh, sorry. I-I also worry about me b-belonging in Kessoku Band... sometimes.”

“Hitori-chan, you aren't stupid for thinking about that.”

“Th-then you aren't a-also...”

Kita thought for a moment. Her grip on Hitori weakened as she lightly pushed Hitori away to see her eye to eye. She could see that Hitori was also crying a little, seeing escaping tears forming.

“Alright then. I'll... try not to be so hard on myself.” Kita said with a smile. Although not on par with her usual smile, it was one filled with genuine nature and gratitude.

“Thank you, Kita-san.”

“Y-you're tracksuit is surprisingly soft on my face.”

“What?”

After calming down Kita (and waiting for her to stop blushing after her comment on Hitori's tracksuit), the duo agreed to continue practising. While Hitori was worried that playing again would make Kita despair even harder, she was relieved to find her playing relatively normal. Though, from her contemplative look as she played, Hitori knew there was still something gnawing at her; and that what Kita opened up to her about was just part of it.

“Kita-san? Is w-what you w-were thinking about not just w-what you, well, told me?” Hitori asked, prompting Kita to stop playing.

“Hm? O-oh. Y... yeah.” Kita placed her guitar back on the stand.

“Y-you can tell m-me about it. Ah, only if you want!”

“I...”

Like the cat had a psychic ability to know when it was needed, Nijicat leapt onto Kita's lap. It didn't appreciate being pushed as a background character between the two guitarists, so it began to knead Kita's thigh through her skirt.

"Oh, Nijicat! Sorry, Kita here has been out of it today. We just played with you though!" Kita said gleefully, part of her bubbly aura coming back.

It's weird when she refers herself in the 3rd person...

Kita calmed the cat down from a potential tantrum, before stroking its fur as it lay on her skirt.

"Thank you Nijicat. And Hitori-chan?" Hitori perked up from Kita calling her. "I do."

Banishing her thoughts that what Kita said made it sound like she accepted her proposal (like she'd ever propose to Kita), Hitori waited for Kita to speak. She could see the redhead take in deep breaths as the cogwheels in her head turned. Hitori smiled at the sight.

She must be prepping herself to talk with me. Reminds me of myself.

"I... I had a fight with my parents. They weren't so happy that I was spending more time on getting better at guitar than on my studies. But, I can't help it! It's what I love doing now."

"I-I can understand that. The pa-passion I mean. My parents are s-super supportive of w-what I do..." Hitori commented, apologising right after that she probably couldn't relate with Kita.

"It's fine Hitori-chan. Seeing you push yourself to make me feel better is more than enough."

Kita continued.

"I know they just want the best for me. But they kept telling me such horrible stuff. Like how it's been almost a year and we haven't even

made a single album. Or how anyone outside of Shimokitazawa doesn't even know we exist. My parents think we should've gone big by now. One day, I'll be able to show them that all the practice has been worth it, but right now? I've got nothing to show."

Kita started to tear up.

"And, it's getting to me. What they said. It was a miracle I was able to bring my guitar in today." Kita shuddered at remembering the words her parents yelled at her. "I-I know they don't mean anything bad, but... what they've said is true. I couldn't help but think that I'm the problem. Sorry about earlier..." Kita shrunk. She didn't mean to startle Hitori.

"I-it's fine Kita-san. You were fr-frustrated. And stuff..."

Kita smiled at Hitori. Even under all her anxiety and quirks, Hitori was a caring friend.

Nijicat began to purr, steadying the redhead. The cat was doing wonders from keeping her held together.

"But, it's kinda true, isn't it? I'm playing catch up with you all and while I'm really, really grateful for your lessons Hitori-chan, I still have a lot to learn. I can play with you all, but..." Kita trailed off.

"I'm doing it again, huh?" Kita muttered, running her fingers through her hair, before bonking herself on the head. "Ugh."

"Th-that doesn't j-just go away so easily. Take it from m-me." Hitori said, checking if Kita's forehead was alright. Her bonk was quite forceful, echoing throughout the studio.

"I'm fine, Hitori-chan." Kita laughed at her concern. "And... yeah."

Despite all that the pinkhead has said, Hitori felt like it wasn't enough. It lacked something. She wasn't sure what, but she knew she had to say more. Even if she really, really, really wanted to

collapse and wither away. Limits were supposed to be surpassed, right?

“D-do you mind if I p-play a little bit? You know that playing g-guitar helps me relax. Ah, sorry th-that practice didn’t really help!” Hitori asked.

“It’s ok, Hitori-chan. Was worth a shot. Go ahead.” Kita replied, still petting the snoozing cat.

Hitori began to strum, not having a specific melody in mind. Her soft strumming and on-the-fly chord changes sounded beautiful to the other guitarist, as she unconsciously started swaying to the music. Hitori’s playing never failed to amaze Kita - that’s what intrigued her when they first met.

Hitori-chan is amazing, isn’t she? Effortlessly playing something so beautiful. Unlike me...

Before she could continue her depressing train of thought, Hitori spoke up.

“T-think about Nijicat.”

Kita looked down at Nijicat, who was currently chasing fish in dreamland.

“It doesn’t do much - actually Nijicat d-doesn’t do anything to help with t-the band. It even got Manager sick. R-really, it’s only here because of Ryo-san.”

Kita sighed. It reminded her of herself and how she only joined the band to get closer with the blue bassist.

“D-don’t look so sad Kita-san! I joined the b-band for selfish reasons too!” Hitori reassured. Her playing slowed.

“But mine’s so shallow...”

"I... uhh-eh... I wanted to join the band to get famous! And, to drop out of school... yeah."

"Really?" Kita snickered. Her reason was what a child would say. It was kind of adorable.

Hitori whimpered.

"Right, right. Sorry."

Hitori returned to her usual pace, getting lost in the music. She spoke again.

"You might feel the same way, like Nijicat. But, it doesn't worry if it belongs here. Partly because Nijicat is a cat... Anyways! Kita-san, I'm saying you shouldn't worry either."

Hitori stared into emerald eyes. Kita looked awful, with tear stains on her school sleeves. Her hair was messy, her makeup slightly smudged, the shine in her eyes long gone. While she was glad that Kita trusted her to show herself like this, Hitori didn't like the sight. Not one bit.

It doesn't suit her.

"After all, aren't we friends?" Hitori smiled at Kita. She looked back at her guitar, composing herself for saying such a line. She took a deep breath before continuing.

"Even if what you said is true. That you aren't good enough, that you feel the need to catch up. We're still friends. You still belong in Kessoku Band. Like Nijicat. Like... me."

Although what she said was mostly for Kita, she was speaking to herself too.

"So, please don't be too hard on yourself. Like you told me Kita-san, 'You're a vital part of our group, and don't you forget it!'" Hitori tried to do a Kita impression.

“Not bad. Could use a bit more oomph.” Kita chuckled. Honestly, Hitori was a dork sometimes.

“Th-thanks... We’re both growing in this band. I’m happy we’ll be together in the long run. I-it what makes us Kessoku Band.” Hitori ended with an over-the-top guitar riff, letting it ripple across the room.

“That was a bit much.” Kita laughed. “The pun too. But... I appreciate it. Really.”

Kita placed the sleeping kitty down, before wrapping her arms around her hero. The hug was awkward, with Hitori’s guitar in the way and Hitori’s light shaking.

“Thank you, Hitori-chan.”

Trying hard not to melt, Hitori reciprocated the hug.

“Y-you’re welcome. I’m glad y-you’re o-ok.”

“Yeah, thanks to you!”

“Meeeeeow!”

Both guitarists broke the hug and looked down to see Nijicat, tugging at Hitori’s tracksuit.

“Sorry, sorry Nijicat! Geez, this cat is very needy.” Kita giggled.

Hitori placed her guitar away and scooped the cat. Very hesitantly, she started to caress its fur, which the feline enjoyed greatly, letting out a satisfied meow.

Honestly, I was more surprised that Nijicat didn’t go for my shoes...

“Hehehehe... reminds me of a c-certain dr-drummer...” Hitori blabbered, proud that she was able to successfully pet Nijicat.

“Except Nijicat’s waaaaaay cuter!” Kita said, her typical shine coming back.

Hitori smiled at the familiar sight.

That’s more like it.

“Let’s practise, Hitori-chan!” Kita shouted, her aura at full blast.

“Ack! Wha-you s-sure?” Hitori averted her gaze, squinting from how bright the room suddenly had become.

Eventually I’ll get used to it. Eventually.

“Mhmm! I’m feeling much better now. And I really wanna learn what you just did. I won’t improve by sitting here and doing nothing!”

“I-improv? S-sure. Ah, but i-it might be hard for y-you...”

“I don’t mind!”

And so the two guitarists began practising again.

Outside, PA-san peered into the room. She’s been scrolling through her phone the whole day as the acting adult of Starry. She could see the two girls strumming away at their guitars. Squinting, she could see Kita. A bit shrivelled in appearance, but she looked like she was having fun. She could even see a bit of her shine in her eyes come back. She sighed in relief.

She did have her doubts that Hitori could talk with Kita. It was Hitori after all. But she was glad that her doubts were proved wrong.

“What a nice group of friends...” PA-san said to nobody, as she gulped down some lemonade.

“I can’t believe you beat me 5 to 12.”

“I know. I thought you grinded everyday.”

“**DON’T** make me smack you.”

Unfortunately, Nijika’s efforts weren’t enough for Ryo’s wrath. Frustrated, Nijika suggested they head back to Starry while they had the time. She needed to hit something. Hard. Good thing there were drums for her frustrations. Maybe that’s why she loved playing the drums. From all the times her bassist drove her mad.

‘But will Manager be alright?’ Ryo asked Nijika, as they locked the door to the Ijichi apartment.

‘Yeah, she will. Give her a few days, Sis will be back to normal.’ Nijika said. *‘Though I hope she doesn’t mind a late dinner. All this pent-up anger has to go somewhere.’* She glared at Ryo.

“You’re lucky that I’m nice of a friend to not tell both of them about your cockroach incident.” Nijika reminded Ryo. It was taking all of her being not to body slam the person next to her.

“I am grateful and in your debt.” Ryo bowed.

“Shut it.”

Nijika is cute when she’s mad. Mental note.

Arriving at Starry, the duo were slightly relieved that the livehouse was just as they left it, if not a bit more tidy. They could see some empty cups on the bar counter.

“Oh, we had some drinks. Like Manager said, nobody came in today.” PA-san hollered from her booth.

“Thanks PA-san! Where’s Bocchi-chan and Kita-chan?” Nijika asked.

“They’re in the studio, practising. Go join them!”

“We will.” Ryo said, but not before sliding over to the bar to get a drink.

“I’ll tell Sis.”

“Aww...”

The drummer and bass pair are shocked upon entering the studio. They find the two guitarists playing like usual, with the exception of Nijicat bobbing its head to the music. Oh, and Kita’s absolute whiplash of an appearance.

“H-hi Ijichi-senpai, Ryo-senpai...” Kita waved at the pair, slightly blushing after being aware of her looks.

Nijika opened her mouth, but Ryo beat her to the punch.

“Did you guys make out or something?”

A swift gut punch to the bassist as she crumbled onto the floor, Nijika quickly enveloped her arms around the redhead. She started wailing.

“Are you okay?!? Did anything happen to you?!?” Nijika cried.

“I’m fine, Ijichi-senpai. But, p-please. You’re kinda crushing me...”
Kita coughed, squirming in Nijika’s arms. She swore she heard her joints crack.

“... worth... i-it...” Ryo heaved out as Nijicat walked over to lick her face. “Th... thanks Nijicat.”

“But really Kita-chan. You look like you went through a tornado. You alright?” Nijika loosened her hold as she got a good look at Kita.

“Yup. Thanks to Hitori-chan!”

Nijika craned her head to see Hitori, fiddling with her hands and looking at the ground. She pulled her in to join the hug.

“Get in here, Bocchi-chan! You deserve it!” Nijika cheerfully said.

“Awawawawa-ehehehe-uh-what? Hehehe-eheheh-heh...” Hitori spat out as she started to melt.

“Yeah, she really pushed her limit to make me feel better.” Kita added, patting on the forming pink puddle on the ground.

“Are... are you sure you both didn’t make out?” Nijika asked. “I’m not against it. But here?”

“NO! No, no, nope. Haha, ehh, kinda looks like it though...” Kita blushed, becoming one with her hair colour. “I wasn’t feeling too good, so we just talked.”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Geez... but I won’t pry. Glad to see things work out.” Nijika scratched the back of her neck.

“Ni... Nijika. We **cough** can’t practise. Without... me.” Ryo wheezed out, clutching her stomach. The girls couldn’t tell if she was faking it or if she genuinely can not play with that gut punch.

“Didn’t you say you always have energy to play bass?” Nijika quipped.

“I can see the light, Nijika. Farewell, everyone...” Ryo whispered, before pretending to be dead.

“Ryo-san, don’t pass a-away!” Hitori materialised back together and knelt before Ryo’s body.

Ryo began to snore loudly as Nijicat cuddled up beside her to nap. Ok, now everyone was sure she was joking around.

“I’ll get our bassist to wake up...” Nijika grumbled.

“Ijichi-senpai... you did punch her pretty hard.”

“She deserved it.”

“Eh?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

And with that, the Chapter 4 trilogy is complete! I guess it is more suitable to read the entire Chapter 4 straight through, but you do you.

I like to think that I write the 'haha, funny' scenes better than more serious scenes. Dialogue is hard. But I do like what I've made. Let me know what you think.

I also have no idea how guitars work. Hopefully it's acceptable to all the guitarists reading.

Thank you for your patience. I have no idea when the next chapter will come out - college literally just started. Thank goodness the 1st week is usually orientation.

Chapter 5 (part 1)

Chapter 7: Chapter 5 (part 1)

Nijika now has the plague. How will the band deal with this setback?

notes to be read at the end if you choose to

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

A hue of blue stretched across the sky as golden rays seeped through the blinds. The sparse clouds in the sky not even attempting to hide away the shine of the Sun, as more of it filled the bedroom of the blonde. For her two introverted bandmates, such a time would warrant an extra hour or seven in bed, snoozing away from their responsibilities. For both of them, waking up at an early hour is equivalent to reanimating the dead, forced to shamle aimlessly until whatever nutrition they took kicked in to pick up the slack.

Nijika was thankful she was not like them.

She was disciplined (mostly by herself - her sister was always an awful role model) to have a strict schedule. With how much responsibilities she has on her plate, she needed enough energy throughout the day to deal with them all. She wouldn't say she was burdened by it, she loved the band! It's her dream - nay, it is all of their dreams! Sure, schoolwork can get mind-boggling and sure, sometimes the weight of everything does get to her. But she knew she'd get through it all, whether through sheer Ijichi tenacity, a pat on the head or with a sick guitar solo from a certain pink-haired girl.

Today would be another school day, a Friday to be exact. She'd go through the school day and present her presentation she spent a week preparing for. Of course, Ryo kept bugging her about it, mostly for help for her own group since surprisingly they weren't in the same group. Nijika was sure they'd do well, especially with Ryo's superpower of cramming at the last minute. That has come in clutch many times in Ryo's life, so Nijika was sure to not doubt that her group would pass.

After school, she'd head over to Starry with the blue buffoon to work with the guitarists. Cleaning tables, working at the bar, handing out tickets at reception - the usual. Well, with Hitori, the usual has turned into unusual, but honestly Nijika wouldn't have it any other way. She gets to hang out with her bandmates, take care of Starry and help Hitori come out of her reclusive shell one step at a time. What a multitasker she is!

Practice soon comes after, being her favourite part of the day. She can slam her stress away on the drums as she jams out with the rest of Kessoku Band. She felt like every practice they get through is one inch closer to achieving their dreams, and so she keeps the cheerful momentum going; quite literally with her drums! Sometimes, they would work on a potential new song and try out an arrangement made by Ryo. Most of the time, it works out and lyrics for that new song starts being made by Hitori. That probably was Ryo's second superpower: to be able to create arrangements out of thin air.

Ok, she had another superpower. An ability to infuriate the blonde drummer. No. Matter. What.

When Nijika returns home after another fulfilling day, she'd cook dinner for her sister and herself. It was never something fancy, particularly with her sister's bland taste in food. If she had the energy to experiment, she would. Though it tends to result in her sister not liking what's cooked, so Nijika sticks to what's tried and true for the both of them. Her mother's dishes.

Maybe she'd work on her assignments after everything before bed. Give them a solid hour or an hour and a half. Sometimes she'd get somewhere, most times she'd go nowhere. On rare occasions, she'd finish an assignment, bringing the blonde a hearty cheer and a knock on her door to pipe down. But on most days, she'd rather get ready for bed and flop onto her soft mattress, littered in stuffed toys and pillows to sink into. She'd let the grasp of exhaustion grab hold of her and drift into sleep, recharging until the next day came for Nijika Ijichi to rise again.

The warm feeling of sunshine pierced through the blonde's blanket. Nijika was ready to get out of bed, do a bit of stretching and start the day. She always beated her alarm anyways. Though, her stuffed toys she was hugging were a bit more fluffy than usual.

Did Sis wash them? Or was Mr. Leatherhead always this soft? And cuddly... Wait.

Nijika realised she wasn't hugging anything. And that Seika never did laundry. Whatever that fluffy thing was, it was on her face. She was struggling to breathe now.

"Gak!" Nijika coughed as she rose up from bed. She started to spit out... cathair?

"Vhat tha..." Nijika spoke with her tongue out.

She looked to her side and saw the culprit of a ruined waking: Nijicat. It was peacefully slumbering on her bed, despite being slid off Nijika's face.

"Well, that's one way to wake up." Nijika muttered, before sneezing. And then she sneezed again. And again.

"Oh no."

Her alarm went off.

“Nijika, I know my cat ruined your day, but could you stop punching me? I get your point.”

“I don’t think you-achoo! Do!” Nijika lightly punched Ryo on the head for the 7th time, with Ryo responding with an “Ow.”

Turns out that not only was Seika allergic to pets but also Nijika, though it’s less severe with the younger sister. Of course, if one were to breathe in fur for a whole night, then they are bound to get allergies. Resilient Nijika refused to miss out on school, especially with all the effort she put into practising for her group’s presentation. Her sister was at first apprehensive of letting Nijika go, but with enough nagging and annoyance she let her go to school. Not without a surplus of masks and alcohol sprays.

‘Don’t go spreading the plague with your classmates! Isolate yourself if you have to!’ Seika waved off to her sister. *‘Change your masks every 15 minutes too! Two at a time, ok?’*

‘Sis! It’s just allergies!’ Nijika yelled.

School was absolute torture for the poor yellow-headed patient. Being drained from the constant sneezing and having to wear a mask meant that Nijika didn’t have enough energy to present. Thankfully, her group mates were understanding and only gave her the conclusion to present. That didn’t stop Ryo from giggling as Nijika went up to present, interrupted by her sneezing and apologies. Meanwhile, Ryo’s group’s presentation went off without a hitch, as expected. Nijika had to refrain from jumping on Ryo for the rest of the lesson. She couldn’t risk collapsing from trying to beat up Ryo.

The duo were heading to Starry, having to tell the news of the plague’s new victim. Nijika was currently clinging onto Ryo for dear life, still lightly punching her on the head with her free arm. Ryo didn’t mind having to drag Nijika all the way to Starry - she could tell Nijika was absolutely pooped when she stumbled towards her after dismissal. At times like this she was grateful that Nijika was light. And short. And Ryo was immune to the sneezing girl’s allergies.

Plus one to Ryo's dope immune system. Heck yeah.

"Onwards, dumb steed! Starry awaits us! Achoo!" Nijika lazily shouted, still hanging off Ryo. She punched Ryo on the head.

"Ow. I'm not a horse."

"Stupid stallion! Uhh, idiotic transport!" Nijika ignored the bassist. She punched Ryo on the head.

"Ow."

Arriving at Starry, the pair are surprised to see Nijicat patiently waiting by the stairs to the entrance. It was drinking some water from a bowl. The duo knew that the guitarist pair had been trying to teach Nijicat. Ever since Kita opened up to Hitori, both of them agreed to come to Starry early to get some guitar lessons before the rest of the band arrived. When they had the time, they would play with Nijicat and teach it some manners. It was a relief that the stray could be taught; no longer did they have to worry about a sick manager.

"Hey Nijicat. Seems Bocchi and Ikuyo taught you well. I'll thank them later." Ryo awkwardly bent down to pet the cat.

"Hey, HEY! It's your fault that I'm like this, you rascal!" Nijika pointed at the cat, who looked at her with confusion.

"Nijika, don't blame Nijicat. It's a cat."

"I don't care. It's also your fault too." Nijika punched Ryo on the head.

"Ow."

The pair were even more surprised to see Seika wearing... a WWII mask?

"I'm not even gonna ask where you got that from Sis."

“What? I’m being safe here! I have a business to run!” Seika piped up, making sure her ‘mask’ was securely on her face.

“With all due respect Manager, you look ridiculous.” Ryo said.

“That’s what I said!” PA-san hollered from her booth.

“I’d smack you if you weren’t keeping my sister awake. Actually, Niji?”

Nijika punched Ryo on the head.

“Ow.”

“Thanks Niji.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve been punching her since we started to walk here.” Nijika proudly stated, before sneezing.

“That’s my girl.”

They all agreed to cancel practice today and send Nijika home to rest. She still had assignments to work on the weekend, and at her current state she wouldn’t get any of that done. Before she did go back home, Ryo dragged her over to the studio to greet the guitarists. Opening the door, they were met with the redhead and pinkhead practising as usual.

“Oh my gosh, Ijichi-senpai! Are you ok?” Kita yelled as she stopped playing, getting Hitori to stop playing as well. Hitori began to visibly sweat.

“She’s fine, guys. Just allergies. Like Manager.” Ryo replied, which made Kita and Hitori sigh with relief.

“Yeah, all because of her dumb cat,” Nijika mumbled.

“Hey now, Nijicat isn’t dumb. It’s still being trained. And, to be fair, it is still a stray.” Ryo came in defense.

“Shut it.” Nijika punched Ryo on the face.

“Ow. Oh yeah, I saw the work you two did with Nijicat. Good work.”

“Oh, you noticed Ryo-senpai? It was mostly Hitori-chan, she’s surprisingly good with training pets. Right, Hitori-chan?” Kita said, before turning to the mostly solid Hitori.

“Ahe-huehheuhueh, me? Aww, nooo... shucks. Eheheheh...” Hitori wobbled before the praise.

Thank you, all my experiences with Jimihen. All of that has led to this moment.

“So, I’m guessing we don’t have band practice today?” Kita asked.

“Mhmm. We kinda still can, just without a drummer. Or maybe I can help you both with guitar practice?” Ryo suggested.

“Ah-eh, t-that can work.” Hitori turned to Kita. “We c-can practise improv better w-with Ryo-san’s guidance.”

“Woah! Getting taught by two guitarists! Amazing!” Kita’s aura filled the room as everyone, minus the redhead, averted their eyes.

“Too bright... but yeah, that works.” Nijika sneezed. “Sorry. Anyways, yeah. Band practice is called off until I recover, but meanwhile you guys can practise on your own parts.”

Nijika smacked Ryo on her forehead.

“Now! Onwards to my abode! I require rest!”

“Ow. Whatever you say, princess.”

“Now you’re begging me to smack you.”

“Hey guys, I’m back.”

“Oh, welcome back Ryo-senpai!” / “Hi, Ryo-san...”

Ryo returned from carrying Nijika back to her apartment. She brought in Nijicat, currently petting the feline for its good behaviour. Though, Seika had to distance herself to the edge of the bar as Ryo brought the cat in, hissing “Keep that gremlin away from me.” while making sure her vintage WWII gas mask was securely on. Through the eyeholes, Ryo saw that she had another mask on. PA-san shook her head at the sight.

“I-is Nijika-chan ok?” Hitori asked.

“Yeah, she’s currently dozing off in her bed. Had to make sure she didn’t drown in stuffed toys. I made sure she had enough medicine too. Got her the strong stuff.”

“Didn’t Manager say that her allergy isn’t as bad though, Ryo-senpai? Won’t just resting do the trick?” Kita pondered.

“In Nijika’s words, ‘I ain’t gonna waste days sleeping here like Sis did!’. Besides, she’s got a bunch of assignments to do tomorrow.” Ryo said, clearing her throat.

“Wow! Your Ijichi-senpai impression is spot on!”

“It r-really is...”

“Meow!” Nijicat agreed. Or meowed out of satisfaction from the petting. Up to interpretation.

“Well, when you spend enough time around her, you know her exact pitch and stuff. Though, it is pretty cool, right?”

“You betcha Ryo-senpai!” / “Ah, yeah. Pretty c-cool.”

Weird not having her but in and disagreeing.

“W-wait!” Hitori screamed. Everybody in the room flinched and turned their attention to the pink-head, who started to slightly melt

from their gazes.

“A-ah-eh, i-isn’t the s-s-strong medicine really p-potent? N-Nijika-chan might g-get an overdose...”

“Nah. Nijika is pretty healthy, so the medicine should work like a charm. Though it will make her sleepy, I told her to take it at night. There shouldn’t be any problems.” Ryo replied, giving her trademark thumbs up and smirk. “Don’t worry Bocchi, my parents are doctors.”

Nijicat meowed. Even the cat agreed that her owner’s word is trustworthy. Totally unbiased.

“Aww, you’re concerned for our leader!” Kita poked at Hitori’s side, which made her almost fly across the room.

“Augh! Wah-eh-uh-agh-o-of course!” Hitori was now on the floor, her seat toppled over.

“It’s pretty cute.” Ryo stated. Hitori has become a slipping hazard, muttering the word “cute” over and over.

“Ryo-senpai! That’s my teacher!”

“She’ll come back.”

“But for how long?” Kita pouted.

“I dunno. Shouldn’t you know, student?” Ryo raised her eyebrow. Nijicat meowed as if it was also asking.

Geez, the two of them are in sync...

“Mmmmm...” Kita grumbled at Ryo, who still had her blank look.

“I know! Why don’t you teach me? While we wait for Hitori-chan.”

“Eh? I don’t teach for free.” Ryo recoiled from the bubbly redhead.

“Awwwww, pleeeeeease? I’m your kohai, Ryo-senpai! And we’re bandmates! Surely you can teach me for free! With all your bass skills, you’re the perfect teacher for me! Asides Hitori-chan!” Kita said, her aura brightening as she spoke with Ryo.

“Guh! Ikuyo, your light... too... bright...” Ryo shielded her eyes with her free arm while also shielding Nijicat’s eyes. She didn’t want to bring blindness to such a cute creature.

“Pppppplllleeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaassssseeeee???” Kita obnoxiously blinked her glowing eyes.

Ryo couldn’t stand the brightness as she knelt on the floor. Nijicat hopped from her arm and scurried to the corner of the studio, curling itself up. It really didn’t understand what was happening, but it feared for the worst.

“C’mon Ryo-senpai! Just for a little bit!” Kita bent down towards Ryo, seemingly to amplify her aura.

Ryo was crawling on the ground at this point, unable to look at Kita’s general direction.

I’m being drained. I need help. Somebody. Anybody!

“Bocchi... help... me...” Ryo croaked as she spotted Hitori back in solid form. She stretched her arm towards her.

Hitori slowly shook her head in disappointment.

You get what’s coming, Ryo-san. I’m sorry.

Ryo groaned as Kita kept on pleading and pleading. It was like she was a little kid, nagging to get some ice cream from her parents.

“Fine. You... win.” Ryo heavily breathed out, holding onto a nearby stool to prop herself up.

“Yay! Thank you so much, Ryo-senpai! You won’t regret it! I am a pretty good student. You can ask Hitori-ch-ah! Hitori-chan! You’re back!” Kita turned to see the pinkhead, before assaulting her with a bear hug.

“Ack! Ki-Kita-san!” Hitori just got air in her lungs, and now it was gone.

“Sorry, sorry. Without Ijichi-senpai, I can be a handful, huh? Hehe!” Kita exclaimed, pulling her tongue out with a cheeky face. Both introverts laughed awkwardly, sharing similar thoughts.

Man, having Nijika now would be nice.

Nijika-chan would be nice around about now.

“A-anyways, you should w-warm up. Ryo-san can b-be a bit brutal with h-her lessons.” Hitori suggested.

“Ah, right! Gimme five minutes!” Kita ran to pull out her guitar as she got ready to warm-up.

Ryo shakily got up and pulled Hitori to the edge of the room. Nijicat slowly walked to Kita and sat down to enjoy her warming up. Kita noticed the cat bobbing its head, so she started to play simple chords that went well together. She squealed when the cat meowed in glee, pulling out her phone to take a few (many) photos of the fluff ball.

“You deal with this almost everyday?” Ryo whispered to Hitori. The pink guitarist nodded.

“A-all the time i-in our lessons...”

“Next time we have lunch, I’m paying.”

“B-but we don’t even eat l-lunch together.”

“It’s the thought that counts.”

The next day, the girls decided to pay Nijika a visit. Despite Nijika being adamant that she'd be alright with the medicine and rest, Ryo insisted that they still visit her to help out any way they can. They can have a big study session and help each other out. On the plus side, Ryo can finally get her backlog of assignments done with minimal effort.

I'm such a genius. Getting friends to do your work for you disguised as a visit. Nice one Ryo. Thanks Ryo.

While she really did want to have a study session (for not-so pure intentions), Ryo also wanted to keep an eye on Nijika. The others agreed, since she would be lonely by herself while her sister tended to Starry. They knew how much she valued their friendship, both as a band and as a friend group. Even under all the bravado and coolness, it was heartwarming to see Ryo care for her friend.

"I didn't expect you to plan something like this." Kita commented as they walked to the Ijichi apartment. Hitori walked a bit awkwardly - it felt odd to walk around Shimokitazawa without her guitar.

"Hmm?" Ryo hummed, carrying some snacks and drinks in a plastic bag.

"Not saying that's a bad thing!" Kita lightly waved her hand. "It's just, this is something that Ijichi-senpai would plan out, y'know? Visit a sick friend and check up on them."

"Right. I could be our new leader." Ryo said confidently.

"Ah-eh, m-maybe that isn't such a g-good idea..." Hitori disagreed, despairing from the thought of giving immense power to someone who probably shouldn't have it.

"Bocchi, I'm not that big of a cheapskate."

"Yeah Hitori-chan! Have some faith in our senpai!" Kita giggled.

“Kita-san, when’s the l-last time Ryo-san paid you b-back?” Hitori deadpanned to the redhead.

Kita choked on the air.

Two and a half weeks isn’t that long, right?

“D-don’t remind me.” Kita whispered, with swirls in her eyes.

“It’s n-not that bad, right guys? I’m trying to become a better person here.” Ryo reasoned with the two guitarists as they both stared at her with dead looks. Both have been victims of Ryo’s scummy behaviour. It seems she’s found their limits.

“C-can we focus on taking care of Nijika?” Ryo squeaked, shuffling along the road a tiny bit faster. The pressure exuding from the guitarist pair was too much. She just recovered from the blinding aura of Kita.

“Y-y-you’re off the h-hook, for now…” Hitori attempted to sound menacing. In reality, she dropped her voice and strained her throat, as she started to cough.

“You’re such a dork.” Kita lightly punched Hitori’s shoulder, before rubbing her back to help with the coughing.

Ryo decided to not say anything, lest they be reminded again of her debts.

“You guys brought your own assignments and stuff?” Ryo asked as they stepped into the elevator. She punched the ‘7’ button.

“Yup! / “Mhmm.”

“Cool. It’ll be productive and fun.”

Hitori fidgeted on the spot as the elevator went up. She was anxious to enter the Ijichi household. It was the first time she was entering

someone else's house. A friend's too!

Ok, Hitori. Gameplan. DON'T BREAK ANYTHING. Simple. Don't touch anything, don't bump into anything, don't even LOOK at things. Use echo-location to find your way through. Shouldn't be too hard. If bats can do it, then so can I!

Kita side-eyed Hitori, who was in the middle of trying to activate her echo-location. She had her fingers on her temples and her eyes shut. Kita could see how hard she was trying to map out the whole building with her mind.

Can't Hitori-chan be normal about this...

"Relax Hitori-chan. It's Ijichi-senpai." Kita soothed the pinkhead. She was snapped out of her echo-location process.

"Wha? Ah, b-but I've never been there..." Hitori mumbled.

"Neither have I." Kita shrugged. "Loosen up a little."

"... right. Thanks Kita-san." Hitori softly smiled at Kita, who smiled back.

"A-a-actually, speaking of Nijika-chan's place, what's i-it like there?" Hitori asked Ryo.

"Oh. I guess like a typical apartment. Bit cramped, but everything's close enough. I like it. Everything's compact too. Y'know, from the small space." Ryo summarised.

"A-ah."

Isn't that just like every other apartment though?

The elevator door opened.

"We're here. Nijika's place is just down the hallway." Ryo said, stepping out of the elevator. The other two followed suit.

“I wonder what her place looks like... kyaa!” Kita squealed. “I’m getting excited just thinking about it!”

Ryo knocked on the Ijichi's apartment door.

“Yo, it’s Ryo.”

Aye, that rhymed. One point to Ryo’s brain. I’m on a roll.

“And Kita-chan!”

Let’s make sure Ijichi-senpai feels better!

“A-and Bocchi...”

Oh gosh, I completely forgot to put on perfume! Do I smell like dust? And mothballs?

The trio heard heavy steps on the other side of the door, as if the person on the other side was struggling to walk.

D-did Nijika-chan turn into a zombie?

After a little bit of fumbling on the door’s lock, the blonde managed to open the door.

“We... welcome to the Ijichi home! C’mon in...” Nijika slurred in her speech, holding onto the door. Hitori swore she could see the hinges shake.

Nijika was still in her pyjamas, hugging a stuffed dolphin. Instead of her trademark side ponytail, her hair was fully down, almost reaching to her knees and very messy. Her stance seemed wobbly and she was slightly hunched over. Anyone could tell she just got out of bed.

“Nijika, I told you we were coming over.” Ryo said.

“Well, y-yeah. But then my bed was soooooooooo comfy. You should get on it. Hehe...” Nijika giggled. Then giggled to herself some more.

Before slipping her grip on her door. "Oh, whoo-"

Before she could hit the floor, Hitori managed to bolt between Ryo and Kita, catching the blonde. With her chest.

"H-huh? Oh, hey Bocchi-chan." Nijika hummed into her tracksuit. "You're soft."

"Awawawawawa..." Hitori spat an assortment of sounds.

"Right?" Kita agreed, before turning scarlet red. "AH, I mean! Ijichi-senpai, you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Tired is all. Sleepy too. Mmm, I want sleep." Nijika continued to speak into Hitori's tracksuit, face unwilling to detach itself from her chest.

Kita sighed, then turned to Ryo. She had something to ask the bassist.

"Hitori-chan, get Ijichi-senpai back to her bedroom. I gotta talk with Ryo-senpai about something." Kita instructed. Ryo raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"Ah, y-y-yes ma'am!" Hitori saluted, making sure Nijika didn't faceplant onto the ground. She shuffled Nijika to carry her by the shoulder, which ended up with her koala hugging the pinkhead. Hitori started to shake from the close contact. And the added weight.

"You're very huggable too. And soft. Did I mention you were soft? Your tracksuit..." Nijika began to ramble as Hitori carried her deeper into the apartment. She was being extremely careful not to hit anything, keeping herself distanced from all of the furniture, almost like she was breaking into someone's house. Hitori could be faintly heard asking where Nijika's bedroom was as they both disappeared.

"So, what did you-"

"Did you drug Ijichi-senpai?" Kita cut her off, with a hint of irritation.

“Oh, that.” Ryo plainly said.

“What do you mean, ‘Oh, that.’ She was basically drunk when we met her!” Kita exclaimed. “Though, I don’t really know what it’s like to be drunk.”

“Relax, Ikuyo. She’s not drunk. Or drugged. I, uhh...” Ryo scratched her cheek. “I might’ve told her to take an extra pill. Just to be safe.”

“I can’t believe you...” Kita glared at her.

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it? She’s mostly back to normal.” Ryo stated. “Well, except the fact that she’s drowsy and stumbling around.”

“Ugh.” Kita groaned.

I’m starting to see what Ijichi-senpai sees in her.

“How long will she be like... that?” Kita asked.

“Reading from the medicine container, she’s gonna be goofy for the rest of the day.” Ryo recalled. She then mumbled, “That’s another reason why I wanted us to be here...”

“Hmm.” Kita still wasn’t convinced.

“Trust me, Ikuyo. She might slur a bit when she talks, but she’s alright.” Ryo reassured the skeptical redhead, placing her hand on her shoulder. “She’ll probably also be unstable, so be careful about that. Oh, and she’s more touchy too.”

“Alright, alright, I trust you. Though, you make it sound like you’ve seen this before.” Kita teased.

“I, uhhh... w-we should probably go back to them. Bocchi might’ve melted if Nijika is still clinging onto her.” Ryo nervously mentioned.

“Yeah, we should.” Kita said. The two let themselves in.

Despite Nijika's odd behaviour, it did make Kita think. She liked hugging her guitarist friend, even if the receiver didn't like them as much.

I wish I could cling onto Hitori-chan like that though. She really is huggable!

"Here's her bedroom. Hey Nijika." Ryo gestured to Kita, before waving to the blonde on the bed, who was still clinging onto Hitori. Both were relieved to see her put together and not all over the room. Or as a puddle on the ground. Or as pink dust coating the whole room. That last scenario might kill Nijika.

"Y-you can let g-go of me n-now, Nijika-chan." Hitori squeaked, using all of her might not to break down to the next state of matter.

"They're here."

"Don't wanna..." Nijika snuggled further into Hitori's arm, causing the pinkhead to screech.

"C-can I... can I join?" Kita softly asked, looking down on the ground. Ryo snickered.

"Mad that Nijika's hogging Bocchi all to herself?" Ryo quipped.

"Shush you!" Kita buried her face into her hands, before lunging at the hugging pair to hug Hitori.

"Hey, hey, Kita-chan. I didn't say y-yes."

"Well, what are you gonna do about it, Ijichi-senpai?"

"Taking advantage in my time of weakness? How crueeeeeeeel." Nijika rocked back and forth, swaying both Kita and Hitori with her.

"N-not you too Kita-san,,," Hitori said. She looked at Ryo for hope.

Maybe she could tear both of them off me. Or, she could offer herself as a hugging sacrifice. Yeah, she can do that. She's cooler, so

they're bound to go to her over me. And she probably smells nicer too.

Ryo pulled out her phone to take a picture.

"I'm gonna make some tea for all of us." Ryo started to head out of the bedroom.

"Oi, Ryo! Can you also get the food downstairs? Delivery should..." Nijika yawned. "Should be there. Somewhere there."

"Gotcha." Ryo quickly fled the room.

"D-d-don't leave me h-here!" Hitori wailed, to no avail. She was stuck in 'hug prison', perhaps for eternity. Curse her apparently soft body.

"Hehe, she's like a teddy bear!" Nijika said.

"A big pink one!" Kita squeezed harder.

Hitori accepted her fate.

Ah. At least this is a good way to die. Goodbye, world...

"You alright, Ryo-senpai? Looks like you saw a ghost." Kita asked, arms now off of Hitori and into her bag.

"Y-yup. Nearly tripped is all. Here's the tea." Ryo raised the tray of teacups. Nijika stifled a laugh, though it took almost all of her willpower not to burst.

"Is Bocchi alright? I think her soul left her body. Or she died." Ryo pointed to the decrepit corpse, still being hugged by Nijika.

"Hmm? Woah!" Nijika recoiled from Hitori, who began to regenerate slowly. She could see life come back to her skin as Hitori dimly glowed in the room.

“... thanks...” Hitori breathed out, voice hollow and void of life.

“You might’ve overdone the hugging Ijichi-senpai.” Kita said, still rummaging through her bag.

“Like you’re one to talk.” Nijika took a teacup from the tray and sipped. She sighed in relief. “Thanks Ryo.”

“Anything for my princess.” Ryo smirked.

“Kita-chan, bonk her on the head for me. Extra hard.”

“M-me? I can’t hit her!” Kita gasped. She nearly spilt her tea.

Nijika flopped back down on her bed, reverting Hitori back to normal.

“Bocchi-chan. Please bonk our dumb bassist.” Nijika ordered.

“Wha-ha, m-m-me?!? I can’t possibly hit Ryo-san! She doesn’t deserve it! She didn’t do anything wrong! She makes all of our cool arrangements for our songs! She plays bass super well. She’s even handsome and pretty. And cool too! It’s no wonder Kita-san fell for her!” Hitori paused her overflow to glance at Kita, who awkwardly waved at her. She was a deer in headlights.

Why... why'd she glance at me? What am I supposed to say? Do I even say... anything?

Hitori continued. “Someone like her doesn’t deserve any beating! Please don’t make me do this!” Hitori pleaded, bowing profusely to Nijika in desperation.

“Ugh, fiiiine. I’ll do it myself.” Nijika mustered the strength to prop herself up on her bed.

The trio watched as she slowly crawled out of her bed, blanket still hanging on her back. In complete silence, minus the occasional sips of tea, Nijika nearly made it to Ryo’s feet, before giving up.

“I hate you all.” Nijika said to the ground. She was content with laying on the floor in defeat. Perhaps if she laid there long enough, she could become the floor and swallow Ryo up.

Hitori nearly spat out her tea.

“Ehehe, she doesn’t mean it Hitori-chan. Right, Ryo-senpai?” Kita nervously said, craning her head to Ryo.

“She could.” Ryo replied. “There’s always a possibility.”

Hitori became a corpse again, croaking a continual sound of death.

“Ahh! Hitori-chan! Please come back!” Kita dropped her bag and shook the pinkhead, in the hopes to shake some life back to her. “Ijichi-senpai, Ryo-senpai, help!”

Nijika began to snore. Ryo pulled out her phone to take a picture.

“Really guys...” Kita sagged, before resuming her revival of Hitori.

When Nijika awoke, she was on her bed. She looked over to the side of the bed to see Kita working on her assignments. It seems they brought out the mini-table Nijika would use for studying. Probably thanks to Ryo. Kita took notice of the awake drummer, and gave her a small wave.

“Morning, Ijichi-senpai! How’d you sleep?” Kita greeted the groggy girl.

“Fine, just...” Nijika yawned. “Fine. W-where’s the other two?” Nijika rubbed her eyes.

“Oh, they got tired of working on assignments, so they’re both discussing possible arrangements for our future songs.” Kita jabbed her thumb towards the living room. “As for me, I really need to get this done. Math’s not my strong suit, hehe...”

“Lemme help. Two brains are better than one, r-right?” Nijika chuckled, inching herself to the edge of her bed.

“Sure, Ijichi-senpai? I don’t want to bother you with my work. Besides, you still have your stuff to do.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s good. We can work on my stuff later...” Nijika nearly whispered. “Although, can you come a bit c-closer? Can’t see from here, heh.”

“Ah, sure!” Kita scooched herself and her work closer to Nijika.

“Thanks.” Nijika laid her side of her head on Kita’s head, startling the redhead. “Ahhh...”

“I-Ijichi-senpai!?”

“Don’t move too much.” Nijika shifted to make herself comfortable. “Your hair is soft. Like Bocchi-chan. Mmmm, soft...”

Geez, Ijichi-senpai is being such a pain! Ryo-senpai is rubbing off on her...

“But h-how will you help me?” Kita asked. Her normally animated way of speaking was gone, with her leader using her head as a pillow.

“Just... just read out the problem. Or something, I don’t know.”

“A-alright then.” Kita slowly turned back to her assignment. At least she’s got help.

“So, I’m struggling with multiplying two bracket thingys together. You know, when you have the... hold on, let me read you one.” Kita explained, skimming her finger through to find an example. “Like this, ‘ $x + 4$ ’ times ‘ $3x - 2$ ’. I remember being taught this, but I forgot.”

“Ahh...” Nijika paused, rubbing her cheek on Kita’s hair.

“Ijichi-senpai...” Kita pouted.

“Right, right. Sorry.” Nijika mumbled. “Yeah, that’s FOIL.”

“FOIL?”

“Firsts, outers, inners, lasts. The order you multiply the terms by. That’s how I remember it anyways.”

“Can you show me how to do that?” Kita carefully raised her papers and a pen so Nijika could see.

“No.” Nijika nuzzled more into Kita’s hair, which Kita had to adjust from the increased weight. “I’ll just tell you what to do.”

“It would be easier if you just showed me how.” Kita grumbled.

“Your hair smells nice too, Kita-chan. Mmm, lavender...”

“Ughh.” Kita clicked her pen. She had to play along. “It’s actually peach...”

“Mmm, peaches... So uhm, wuh... what’s the question again?”

“It’s... ‘ $x + 4$ ’ times ‘ $3x - 2$ ’.” Kita read the question again.

“Mm. So first, you times the first terms of each bracket.” Nijika instructed, lazily raising a finger to accentuate her point. She lowered it when she realised Kita couldn’t see her.

“So... ‘ x ’ and ‘ $3x$ ’?”

“Yup. You know how to multiply, right?”

“Of course Ijichi-senpai!” Kita was offended.

“Hehe, of course. Just pulling your leg.” Nijika snickered.

“Grr...” Kita wrote down on her paper. “So, what’s next? Outers?”

“Yeah, so you multiply the most out terms together.”

“That’s ‘x’ and ‘2’?”

“I think you mean...” Nijika yawned. “Mean ‘-2’. Since that’s, y’know. Yeah.”

“Huh? What do you-ohhhh. I see it now.” Kita again wrote. “Inners? So, the inside terms?”

“Mhmm. I think that’s... ‘4’ and ‘3x’.”

“Yeah, gotcha.” Kita wrote. “Isn’t there one more step?”

“Lasts. You can guess which two terms you multiply.”

“The last terms! So... ‘4’ and ‘-2’. Ok, ok!” Kita wrote. “Then, do I make my answer cleaner?”

“If you mean simplifying, yup.”

“Alright, gimme a sec.” Kita simplified her answer, remembering to order the terms in descending degree order. She had Hitori to thank for teaching her that.

“Is this correct?” Kita asked, showing Nijika her work. She had to bend her arm awkwardly since Nijika was still on her head.

“Hmm...” Nijika hummed as she squinted to read her work. It took her a minute before replying. “Yup, that’s correct. Good job Kita-chan.”

“Yay! Thanks Ijichi-senpai!” Kita turned to give Nijika a hug, shocking the blonde as her pillow began to squeeze her tightly.

Being taught like this is weird. But any help is better than none! And Ijichi-senpai is smart!

“Hehe, no problem... Though you might not want to shake me too much. Still have a headache.” Nijika held her forehead.

“Oh, whoops! Sorry!” Kita detached herself from the blonde. “Might be a bit much to ask you for help...”

“Oh, I don’t mind helping out.” Nijika waved her off, rolling off her bed. After an uncomfortable thump on the floor, she sat herself next to Kita, resting her chin on her shoulder. “Got any more q-questions to work on?”

Kita shuddered from feeling Nijika’s warm breath on her neck.

Now this is even weirder! She’s being extremely close!

“Kita-chan?” Nijika poked her on the cheek.

“Ah-ah, yes! There’s more!” Kita’s face turned to a shade like her hair as she frantically searched for another question.

“Hehe, you’re cute when you’re flustered.” Nijika poked again at her cheek.

“Mmmm... stop it Ijichi-senpai.” Kita flushed a deeper red.

“Yo, Ikuyo, Nijika. You gotta hear this. Bocchi’s a genius.” Ryo came into the room, holding up her phone. Hitori peeked into the room from the side.

“Ah, i-it’s only thanks to Ryo-san...”

Both stared at the blonde and redhead for a moment before Ryo spoke up.

“Nijika, you trying to be like Nijicat? You’re doing a pretty good job if so.”

“I’d choke you if I could.” Nijika whined, nuzzling more into Kita’s neck.

"That was a compliment."

"I-Ijichi-senpai... you still need to help me with these problems." Kita continued to blush furiously from how Nijika was being strangely affectionate. Like a cat. Huh.

"Oh, you guys working on Math? Great, I need help too. Trigonometry is a pain." In a flash, Ryo was now sitting across the two studying girls, with her assignments on the mini-table.

"Ryo, can we..." Nijika yawned as she turned to Ryo, head still on Kita's shoulder. "Can we finish up with Kita-chan's work? We could use your help."

"Aren't you smarter than me though? Especially in Math?"

"I'm sleepy."

"H-hi s-sleepy..." Hitori mumbled, now sitting by the mini-table.

An awkward silence laced the room.

That wasn't funny, wasn't it? Now things are gonna be super awkward. Ugh, why did I have to try to joke? Stupid Hitori! I'm not even funny! I don't think I've ever been funny! Ahhhhhh, I just want to-

Nijika began to snicker, before bursting into full-blown uncontrollable laughter. She was laughing so hard, she fell onto the ground as she clutched her belly. Ryo and Kita gave each other concerned glances. Maybe they finally broke Nijika.

Hitori giggled a bit too. She was glad Nijika found it funny. Even if she was nearly dying of laughter. She scooted over to the flopping blonde.

"A-are you ok, Nijika-chan?" Hitori asked. "I-it wasn't t-that funny."

"Hahah, ehehehe, haah..." Nijika calmed down and sat up. "Haah... yeah it wasn't."

Hitori sank a bit from her comment.

“A-ah, but it did make me feel better! You know what they say, ‘laughter is the best medicine’!” Nijika tried to make Hitori feel better, tackling the pinkhead around her waist. Hitori instantly shot up, trembling from the sudden contact.

“So, what was so funny about it?” Ryo bluntly asked.

“Ryo-senpai!”

“I... actually don’t know. Heh, it’s pretty stupid.” Nijika laughed to herself. “Maybe I just needed a good laugh.”

“I-uhh. I’m g-g-glad to make y-you feel b-better?” Hitori said, arms still in the air and unsure what to do with them.

“Hehe, yeah...” Nijika rubbed her cheek against Hitori’s tracksuit. Hitori sighed. She was more bothered at how much Nijika really wanted to hug something.

She really is like Nijicat, huh.

“Kita-chan, you don’t mind if I recharge for a bit?” Nijika asked.

“Ijichi-senpai. You’ve been nuzzling me and laying your head on me since we started. We worked on one question.” Kita crossed her arms. Nijika pouted and gave her a sad face. Kita sighed. “Fine. Maybe you can help me, Hitori-chan? Have you worked on our recent assignment yet?”

“Ah, n-not yet. B-but I don’t mind helping.” Hitori attempted to move nearer to Kita. “Kinda h-hard to move with Nijika-chan in the way. N-no offence, Nijika-chan...”

“I’m not moving.” Nijika buried her face into Hitori’s tracksuit. “It’s so soft, hehe...”

“Hey, why don’t you ask me for help? Me and Nijika are in the same year anyways.” Ryo asked.

Kita shot her an unimpressed look.

“Ok, fair.”

“You can see it from here though, Hitori-chan?” Kita asked, which Hitori nodded. “I’ll just show you and you can tell me what to do. So, here’s...”

Kita and Hitori trudged through each question, a little bit awkwardly on Hitori’s side as she told Kita what she thinks she should do. The yellow-haired koala around her waist wasn’t helping at all, snoozing away peacefully. Hitori had to balance helping her classmate out and keeping Nijika asleep. Though she’d prefer her awake and not clinging onto her body, she couldn’t bring herself to wake her up.

Besides, a small part of her found it cute.

Despite her appearance, character, and, well... everything that is Hitori Gotou, she managed to aid Kita throughout her assignment. Math wasn’t the strength of either of the girls, yet through putting their heads together, they finished it. They even managed to work on Hitori’s assignments, unsurprisingly being a larger pile than Kita’s.

“Hitori-chan, are you keeping up with your studies?” Kita asked, helping guide Hitori on a difficult question.

“Ah, k-kinda. It t-takes me a while to get the l-lessons, so I’m a bit s-slow with assignments. Sorry...” Hitori mumbled.

“Hey, no need to be sorry! Everyone studies at their own paces, right?”

“Mmm.”

“Heh. Guess cramming at the last minute suits me.” Ryo proudly said, puffing her chest out.

“... right, Ryo-senpai. You only.” Kita deadpanned.

“If you must know, I am your senpai. Therefore, if my way works, then it certainly works with you both. Trust me, the Yamada way is the best.” Ryo gave a thumbs up.

“... don’t listen to that idiot.” Nijika muttered, yawning as she stretched. “Oh, hey guys. S-still working on Kita’s... thingamabob?”

Hitori sighed blissfully when Nijika detached from her body.

I am released! Finally! Freedom! I don’t need to worry about drenching Nijika-chan in my sweat! Or if she can smell my stench! I must reek of old closet...

“Um, Ijichi-senpai. We’re already done... But! We are working on Hitori-chan’s stuff! Wanna help out?” Kita exclaimed.

“S-sure.” Nijika took a glance at Hitori’s paper. “You forgot to distribute the square.”

“O-oh, right. I d-did have a feeling s-something was off with m-m-my answer... thanks...” Hitori erased her previous answer.

“Ahh! No wonder!” Kita snapped her finger. “Even when you just woke up, you still got that. That’s amazing Ijichi-senpai!”

“Hehe, call it the Ijichi special...” Nijika bashfully said.

“Oh good, you’re awake. C’mere.” Ryo teleported to Nijika’s side and began to drag her to Ryo’s side of the table. The two guitarists watched as Nijika’s lifeless body was dragged, before Ryo propped her up. She slumped on Ryo, who didn’t seem to mind.

“You know, y-you coulda done that... what’s the word... more gracefully. Yeah...” Nijika groggily said, rubbing the back of her head.

“Sorry. But this requires your utmost attention.” Ryo pointed to her work. “Is this right?”

“Ugh. You’re making me want to doze off again.”

“We still have your stuff to do.”

“Ughhhh. Don’t remind me.” Nijika face planted on the table.

The two parties continued to work on their assignments. While the guitarist duo found it much easier to work on Hitori’s work since Kita sat next to her, the drummer and bassist didn’t have it so easy. It seemed like studying was the antithesis of Ryo, as if her brain was refusing to listen to Nijika. She kept getting more infuriated at the incompetence of her blue friend, but was too tired to do anything about it, so she’d groan and repeat what she said, hoping that it’d somehow get through her thick skull. Brute force must work in the end, right?

“You know, you COULD try to learn something. Anything!” Nijika said.

“What do you mean, we just finished.” Ryo finished up with her work and glanced at Nijika. “You know I hate trig.”

“But most of that was me! I might as well be the one handing that assignment in!” Nijika shouted, holding her head. Her head panged and ached, mostly from Ryo.

“Exactly.”

Nijika deflated and crawled to her schoolbag. Oh well, at least they can get started with her stuff.

“N-Nijika-chan, why don’t you charge Ryo-san f-for your teaching?” Hitori asked, trying to make the drummer feel better. “Y’know, s-so that you c-can make a p-profit. Or something...”

“Money won’t make me feel better, but...” Nijika held her chin. “That is tempting.”

“L-let’s get started, Nijika?” Ryo enthusiastically said, having a bit more force into it than usual.

Kita and Hitori shook their heads as the drummer and bassist got to work again. From the short glances of the guitarists, it was obvious that while Ryo was trying her best to help, she had no idea what the contents of Nijika's paper were about.

"You know, now that I think about it, Math isn't so bad." Ryo concluded, nodding at Nijika's English assignment as if she understood it.

"Shut it." Nijika smacked her hand on Ryo's face.

"Mmph." Ryo mumbled.

"Oh, you're working on English? Why didn't you say so, Ijichi-senpai? I'm good at that!" Kita beamed, swiftly appearing next to the blonde. "Me and Hitori-chan are pretty much finished with her stuff." Hitori gave a thumbs up in the background.

"N-now that I... yes me... I think about it, I shoulda just asked Kit-Kat-chan. I mean, Kita-chan. Mmm, I'm hungry..." Nijika said, hand still on Ryo's face.

"Mph mmmph mm mphh." Ryo detached Nijika's hand from her face, stood up and left the room.

"Yeah, you do that. You, uhh, blueberry. Hehehe... blueberry." Nijika fired at Ryo, before slumping on Kita.

"Geez Ijichi-senpai, at least try to keep yourself together..." Kita sighed. She lightly blushed at the physical contact, still not used to Nijika being so clingy.

"I don't t-think it's bad though. Nijika-chan's kinda cuter t-this way." Hitori blurted. "A-ah, I mean! She's always cute! Wait, no - I don't think that she's cute all the time. I mean! Well! Uhh! I'm not thinking about that everyday! Yeah! OhgoshImessedthatuphuhthey'llthinkI'mweirdand-"

“I agree, Bocchi-chan. I am cute. Hehe, I’m cute. I’m cute...” Nijika rambled, repeating about her cuteness for a solid two minutes. Kita and Hitori shared awkward glances at each other.

It’s miraculous she’s able to get her work done in this state...

Is Nijika-chan supposed to be like this? Her true nature?

“Got the food.” Ryo walked in the room, laying the take-out Nijika ordered on the mini table.

“Oh, sweet! Ijichi-senpai?” Kita patted Nijika’s cheek. “We’ll work on your English later, ok? Some food will make you feel better.”

“It definitely will.” Nijika sat upright, going into autopilot as she untied each plastic bag and set out the plastic plates.

“I-is it ok for me to e-eat? Sorry, I’m not u-used to this...” Hitori mumbled. Eating at a friend’s house was new to her.

“Of course, you goof! I don’t w-want you to starve.” Nijika exclaimed as she weakly passed her some chicken. Hitori’s eyes glistened at the sight. “Although Ryo over here... might actually s-starve you if you came over to her place.”

“I’m not mean.” Ryo swallowed some broccoli, plastic plate already empty.

The girls gave her unimpressed looks.

“Ok, I’m not that mean.” Ryo corrected herself, already leaning over to grab some chicken.

“Hey, save some for Bocchi-chan.” Nijika swatted Ryo’s chopsticks as Ryo whimpered.

Sharp reflexes when dealing with Ryo-senpai, huh. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised.

The group continued to chow down on their food. Kita and Nijika shared their school stories, the former sharing the many mishaps of Hitori (said girl shrank smaller and smaller with every story) and the latter sharing the amount of times Ryo ate from her lunch. Although the amount wasn't a ludicrous number (if it was, Ryo would be dead), it was somewhat funny how reliant Ryo was to get her needed nutrition from the blonde. The stories of Hitori, other than being very entertaining to listen to, show how she's improving with her anxiety. Most of the situations Kita described came from her trying to be bold. At least, bold in Hitori's eyes.

"Man, m-must be fun hanging out with Bocchi-chan." Nijika mumbled, shuffling her body to clear the table.

"Yeah it is! But don't worry. She's in good care!" Kita gave a thumbs up, radiating with her aura.

"I'm right h-here..."

"Oh, sorry Hitori-chan! All those bold moments and I forgot to reward you, huh?"

"Ah, th-that's not needed. Rea-" Hitori spoke up too late, as Kita's hand was now on her head.

"Nonsense. You've earned it!" Kita beamed her smile. Hitori was an inch away from becoming a spill puddle.

"Ehehehehehe, nooooo... please... hehehehehe... spare meeee..." Hitori tried to protest, weakly slapping Kita away. That didn't stop the onslaught of headpats.

I'm glad Bocchi-chan has someone like Kita-chan. They're kinda cute together too.

Nijika sighed as she shoved the last of the trash in the bag, tying it neatly.

“You coulda helped Ryo. I’m almost falling a-apart here.” Nijika heaved, her dizziness not helping her in the slightest.

“Oh, sorry.” Ryo leaned over and began to pat Nijika on the head.

“Not like that!” Nijika shouted, but continued to nuzzle into her touch. How could her body betray her? “Well, i-if you don’t mind... heh.”

“You guys have been hanging out here the whole time?” Seika asked as she shambled by her sister’s bedroom and finding the whole band playing on Nijika’s Bintendo Smitch.

“Oh, hey Manager.” Ryo greeted.

“Yup! You don’t mind us being here, Manager?” Kita asked.

“S-sorry for the i-intrusion...” Hitori weakly waved.

“Not at all guys. Though it is pretty late. You guys should be getting home.” Seika said.

“Whuh... really?” Nijika yawned. She took a little nap while the girls were playing. She still felt the scars from playing with Ryo. Nijika peered through the blinds to see the night sky. Looks like they did hang out for the entire day. Nijika smiled to herself.

I have nice friends.

The others looked at the window, shocked to see that it’s already nighttime.

“Aww, and we were just beginning to have fun...” Kita placed her controller down and pouted. Having Ryo teach both of them the basics of Smash was fun. Even if Ryo ended up winning every match they played.

“Don’t you live far Bocchi?” Seika asked Hitori, who shot up and saluted, before placing her arm down.

“Y-yes. I should g-get going then. Th-thanks for having m-me.” Hitori bowed to Nijika and Sekia. She then stood up, but jolted from a tug on her sleeve. She looked back to see Nijika grabbing onto it.

“W-wait, Bocchi-chan! Don’t go!” Nijika tightened her grip. “We can have a... whatsitmacalled... Ryo, help. Brain no worky.”

“A sleepover.”

“Yeah, that!” Nijika clicked her tongue.

“Oh, that sounds fun! Kessoku Band bonding, hehe!” Kita sparkled.

“A-ah, I sleep f-fine Nijika-chan, but t-thanks for your con-” Hitori responded.

Wait, sleepover? Waitwaitwaitwaitwaitwaitwaitwait. WAIT.

“SLEEPOVER?”

The horror! How will Hitori ever survive? Tune in next time for part 2 of Chapter 5!

Hi. College just started, so time to work on this is getting smaller and smaller. I can't be sure when part 2 will actually come out, but do look out for it! I am 100% sure that that's the last part for Chapter 5.

This is also a longer part of a chapter, at least longer than the parts in Chapter 4. Actually, this is probably longer than any of my previous chapters. Lotta talking. I just didn't want to segment this into more parts, cuz I think that's cringe. Writing this was fun though. I wanted to write more interactions outside of the two obvious pairings within the group. Hopefully I did achieve that. The math segment was especially fun to write. Totally not biased as a math major.

Sorry that Nijicat gets pushed to the side for this chapter (yeah, Nijicat's not gonna be prevalent in the next part).

Proofreading sucks. Hard to keep in mind everyone's current character and personalities and stuff. Average writer moment to be honest.

Ok, go eat your vegetables.

Chapter 5 (part 2)

Chapter 8: Chapter 5 (part 2)

A sleepover? Surely Hitori can last it out. And Nijika's still goofy. Silly Nijika.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

"Niji, stop rolling on the floor." Seika sighed, face palming.

"Weeeeee! Hehehehe, r-rolling on Bocchi-chan is fuuuuuun! She's bouncy too!"

Shortly after Hitori melted on the floor from the thought of a sleepover, Nijika took this opportunity to flop on the floor and roll on the pink puddle. She always wanted to know if Hitori in her liquid state actually acted like liquid, and perhaps if she thrashed around little bits of her would paint the room. Unfortunately, the puddle was more jelly-like, so all Nijika was doing to poor Hitori was flattening and wobbling her.

Also, rolling on the floor sounded much more fun in Nijika's head. Well, what's left of it anyways.

"Ryo."

"Yeah, yeah Manager. You don't need to tell me." Ryo yanked Nijika away from the puddle, struggling as the blonde squirmed in her grasp.

"Noooooooooooo! I like the floor! It's comfy... hehe... heh."

"Kita. Do you, uhh... since Nijika is, well, y'know." Seika pointed to her sister, who was now giggling to herself.

“Yup! Don’t worry, this kinda stuff happens all the time!” Kita gleamed, gathering all of Hitori’s essence to sculpt her back to normal.

“Wish it didn’t.” Seika rubbed her forehead.

“Eh, you know how Hitori-chan is. One step at a time, Manager.” Kita patted Hitori’s shoulders, rebooting the pinkhead.

“Yeah.”

“I-I-I’m s-s-sorry!” Hitori immediately bowed to Seika.

“You’re fine Bocchi. Give your parents a call. That goes the same for you two, Kita and Ryo.”

“Oh, I don’t need to. They probably already know I’m staying here.”

“Ryo-senpai, you’re just saying that because you’re too lazy to give them a call.” Kita stated, pulling out her phone.

“I’m not lying. Plus, I’ve got this to deal with.” Ryo shook Nijika, still being held together by Ryo.

“Whaaaaat? Me? Awww, you shouldn’t have...” Nijika bashfully said, her head swaying limp.

“Point taken.” Kita replied, before dialling her parents.

“B-b-but is it r-really ok for me to... stay?” Hitori asked.

“Of course. It’s a weekend. Enjoy your high-school lives.” Seika said, mumbling, “While it lasts...”

“Be... besides, I, yes me thank you, suggested it. I don’t mind you being here...” Nijika mumbled, before falling to sleep in Ryo’s arms.

“Ah, Nijika-chan?”

“Ryo-senpai, why is she still like... that?” Kita said after finishing her call with her parents. She raised an eyebrow. “I know you said it’d wear off by tomorrow, but it should be weakened. Or something.”

“Ehehehe, yeeeeaaaaahhh...” Ryo awkwardly laughed, sweating bullets. Kita’s eyebrow raised higher as Seika joined in.

“Okaaaaaaay... I might’ve, umm.” Ryo tried to scratch the back of her head without waking up the blonde in her arms. “Might’ve given her three pills and not two? Maybe. Who knows really.”

The glares she received could level buildings, with Kita and Seika peering into her soul.

“You’re lucky you’re holding my sister right now.” Seika said menacingly, a voice reserved for those who really wronged her - typically, store employees or band members.. She shook her fists vigorously to compensate for not walloping Ryo out of the window.

“I love you too much to hurt you Ryo-senpai. But I’m seriously close to smacking you.” Kita spat coldly.

“A-ah, I don’t I-like hurting my friends... so I won’t h-hit you.” Hitori spoke up. “But please, d-don’t do something like this a-again.”

Seika and Kita diverted their gaze to Hitori, bringing a sigh of relief to Ryo.

Let’s try not to make them more mad, ok Ryo? We will straight up die if we do. Mental note.

“Hitori-chan.” Kita placed her hand on her shoulder, giving Hitori a shock. “You’re too precious for this world.”

“Eh-ah-auh-wowawawa-me? Heheh, ehehehe...”

“I agree.” Seika gave a slap on Hitori’s back. A little too hard, as she stumbled forward a bit. “Now go give your parents a call, Bocchi. It is pretty late. They must be worried sick for you.”

“Ah, y-yes Manager!” Hitori saluted, before fumbling to pull out her phone. She rubbed her back, slightly sore from Seika’s slap.

Maybe this is retribution from all the mistakes and accidents I made during work.

“Y-yeah. I can stay, guys.” Hitori ended the call, rubbing her ear. Her parents were ecstatic that she’d be staying at Nijika’s place. A little too ecstatic.

“Yay! Me too!” Kita hopped with glee.

“Great. I’ll get the futons ready, you guys make yourselves at home.” Seika waved as she left.

“Thank you so much Manager!” / “Th-thanks Manager...”

“Oh, Manager? Can you also get the snacks I brought? Would go to waste.” Ryo asked, laying Nijika on her bed so that her arms could rest.

“Mmm.” a reply could be faintly heard.

“Oh, but we didn’t bring any nightwear. I don’t mind sleeping in what I’m wearing right now though!” Kita said.

“Don’t worry. Nijika has a load of spare pajamas. Lemme show you.” Ryo opened Nijika’s wardrobe, revealing a section that’s filled with pajamas. “She even has full body suits, like this dinosaur one.”

“Let me guess. She also has a bunch of your pajamas too.” Kita deadpanned.

“Of course.”

Kita shook her head.

Why am I not surprised? Although it is nice of Ijichi-senpai to not mind!

“C-can I wear the dinosaur one? L-looks cute to me. Ah, i-i-it’s also baggy and fluffy!” Hitori asked.

“Sure. And you Ikuyo?” Ryo handed the dinosaur pajamas to Hitori.

“Anything’s fine really.”

Taking turns changing in Nijika’s bathroom, the girls decided to watch a movie. The snacks and drinks Ryo bought would go to waste otherwise - at least, that’s what Ryo said. On the plus side, Ryo got to introduce the Sharknado series to Kita and Hitori, both of which raised eyebrows at the mention of the title.

“Hey girls. You don’t mind having to share a, oof, a bed?” Seika softly yelled, lugging a futon just behind her. “We only have one spare, and I don’t want any of you sleeping on the couch.”

“Sure Manager! I don’t mind at all!”

“A bed’s a bed.”

“T-the couch doesn’t sound t-too bad...”

All eyes turned to Hitori.

“Uh-eh, I-I mean. Sure! Hahaha, yeah.” Hitori gave a thumbs up, legs wobbling from the pressure.

“Great. Oh yeah, Ryo. Here.” Seika threw the bag of snacks at Ryo, who caught it.

“Thanks Manager.”

“I’ll just, uhh. Finish on some work. Yeah. Don’t stay up too late guys.” Seika waved, heading to the living room. She then can be heard turning on the TV and slumping on the couch.

“Uhh, don't you think we should include Manager with us?” Kita asked.

“Nah. It'd be awkward.”

“Hmm. True.”

“S-so, Ryo-san. Which movie do w-we start with?”

“*yawn* You g-guys watching a movie?” Nijika stretched. “W-without me?”

“Wouldn't dream of it. We were gonna start with Sharknado II.” Ryo held up the Blu-Ray case to Nijika's face. Turning to the guitarists, she added, “Everyone starts here.”

“W-why not the f-first one?”

“We don't talk about the first Sharknado movie.”

“Hehe, the first one is baaaaaaaaaaaaad.” Nijika explained. “Trust me. Had to s-sit through it with this bozo.”

“Yup.” Ryo shuddered. Nijika's reaction to the movie still haunts her.

“R-right.” Kita said. “Anyways, help me with the futon. I call dibs sleeping on it!”

“I call dibs on the bed. Nijika's bed is soft.” Ryo walked over to help Kita.

“And Nijika calls dibs on Nijika's bed! Hahaha, I didn't need to say it, but it's funny! Haha!” Nijika announced, before crumbling under her own laughter. The girls could only just watch her laugh at her own... joke?

At least she's enjoying herself.

Remind me to never give Nijika more than the normal amount of medicine. Thanks Ryo.

Nijika-chan is really goofy under heavy medicine, huh. WAIT-

“Th-th-that means I-I’m gonna sleep w-w-with Kita-san???” Hitori screeched, horrified at the thought of having to sleep next to THE Ikuyo Kita.

“The floor’s an option.” Ryo plopped the futon next to Nijika’s bed.

“Ryo-senpai! I’m not that bad to sleep with!”

Kita paused.

“I’m not bad to sleep with at all!” Kita corrected.

“How would I know? I never slept with you.”

“Bwahahahaha, ahahahahaha!” Nijika laughed harder. Her mind was rolling in the gutter.

“Nijika, stop thinking dirty.” Ryo crossed her arms. “You need to tell me your TV’s password.”

“Ahahahaahahahaahahaha!”

“Ugh, gimme a sec.” Ryo went over to tame the garbling yellow-head. She wrapped Nijika around with a blanket and hugged her tightly.

“Shouldn’t you know Ryo-senpai?”

“Nope. It’s, urk!” Ryo struggled to keep Nijika still. “It’s voice... activated. Her voice, I think. Gave it - hey, stop. Gave it as a, hnng, gift.”

Both Kita and Hitori opened their mouths in astonishment. Nijika was eventually able to calm down.

“Wr-wrapping someone with a blanket really isn’t a g-great way of calming someone down.” Nijika said, with Ryo unwrapping her from her fluffy prison. “The password’s... uh-hh. Hmm. Let me think.”

Nijika closed her eyes and thought hard. Real hard. So hard that Hitori was worried she was actually constipated and this was her weird way of saying that she needs to be brought to the bathroom.

Rubbing the belly helps with constipation! I think. But it’s way too embarrassing to rub Nijika-chan’s belly! With everyone watching too! Ugh, the things I have to do for my friends.

“Ummmmmmmmmm. ‘DrumsAreCool’?” Nijika said, loud enough for her TV to hear. She sighed in relief when the TV started up.

“Haha, yeah!” Nijika pumped her fist, then rubbed her head. “Owww, my head...”

“Try not to laugh too hard. Or shout.” Ryo finished unwrapping Nijika and gave her a pat on the head.

“Yeah, yeah... uh-h, Bocchi-chan?”

Nijika stared at the pink head as she shambled towards her, sat beside her and began to rub her belly.

“I-I know constipation i-is kinda embarrassing, but y-you don’t have to h-h-hide stuff like that...” Hitori whispered. “I-I can help you to th-the bath-”

“Bwahahahahaha, ahahahaahahaha!” Nijika erupted once again in laughter.

“Oh my gosh Bocchi. I just calmed her down!” Ryo grumbled, getting the blanket ready.

“Wh-what? He-healthy bowel movement I-is important...” Hitori mumbled.

“Ikuyo, a little help? She’s squirming a lot more than before.”

“**sigh** Alright.”

“Ugh, my head feels like a nail went through it.” Nijika held her forehead. She slumped onto Ryo on the bed.

“That’s what you get for laughing so hard.” Ryo replied, finding the right source for the Blu-Ray player.

“Shut.”

...

“You forgot the ‘it’. Or ‘up’. Depends on you, really.”

“Mmm.” Nijika snuggled into Ryo.

With a mellowed down Nijika, the girls got to their watching positions. Ryo and Nijika sat cross legged on the bed, with Nijika essentially using the blue bassist as a backrest. Of course, Ryo didn’t mind, a small smile plastered on her face as she set up the movie. Meanwhile, Kita and Hitori sat on the futon, their backs against the bed. The redhead was currently consoling the trembling Hitori, who was mentally beating herself for mistaking the situation before.

“It’s ok Hitori-chan. You were concerned for Ijichi-senpai!” Kita soothed, rubbing small circles on Hitori’s back.

“Doesn’t h-help the urge to wi-wither away...” Hitori peeped. She quickly dove her face into her arms.

“Aww, don’t! Then you’ll miss the movie!”

“Hnnng...” Hitori continued to sulk.

She then felt something soft lean on her shoulder.

Aww, Kita-san got me a stuffed toy to cheer me up. Still don't feel much better, but I should at least thank her. Yeah.

"T-thanks Kita-san, but I-I-awheuh?"

"You make for a great pillow Hitori-chan. A big dino-pillow! Hehe!" Kita leaned further into Hitori, almost sending the pink dino girl tumbling off the futon.

Ah. Once again, I find myself in yet another prison. Bounded by the pressure of not satisfying Kita-san and making her lose her balance on me. What a cruel fate! Is today really my punishment? For all the wrongdoings I have done? And what wrongdoings have I done? I haven't broken any laws, nor have I angered any of my friends. Well, not too much. That's it. I must atone! I must be a better person. For the band!

"Bocchi, we haven't started watching the movie. Calm down." Ryo commented as she noticed Hitori clenching her fist in a determined manner.

"Y-yeah Bocchi-chan! The screen's s-still black. Heh, black." Nijika pointed at the TV, before poking Ryo's cheek. "Ryo! Make it not black."

"I'm not a remote."

"Well, y-you're holding it."

Ryo promptly started the movie. She was eager to rewatch her favourite film of all time again. She was a sucker for poorly budgeted yet hilarious movies, so finding out about Sharknado was a stroke of gold. Nijika, though sharing some of Ryo's eagerness, was forcing herself to watch. She really didn't want to collapse into bed; not with her guests in her own bedroom! The headache and her loopy nature were certainly not helping. Kita watched from Hitori's shoulder. She could tell that the film was poorly made, but found the jokes hilarious. Mainly from the horrible delivery and how hammy everything was.

This film really did fit Ryo. Even Hitori watched! She needed anything to distract herself from having to think about her redemption, and so with it playing right in front of her, she couldn't refuse.

"W-wow. That was q-uite the f-film, huh." Hitori said as the credits rolled.

"Mhmm! And that 'shark falling out of the sky' gag! Pfft, it got me every time!" Kita snickered, trying not to burst out laughing.

"I know! And then that guy would be like, 'Didn't know it was raining sharks today!'" Ryo beamed. She was strangely elated, perhaps from the film. "It's so stupid!"

"... mmm, y-yeah... Ryo's st-stupid... hehe. Heh..." Nijika stuttered, barely awake on Ryo's shoulder.

"Looks like Baby Nijika needs her bedtime now."

Nijika would retort, but she didn't have any energy to spare. So, she slumped her whole body on Ryo and began to drift into sleep.

"Guess we should also sleep, hmm?" Kita yawned. "It's getting pretty late. And beauty like this needs beauty sleep!"

"Y-yeah. Wouldn't w-want to ruin that..." Hitori mumbled, still bothered that Kita was still leaning on her.

With the lights closed, the girls went to bed. The low glow of Nijika's lamp permeated throughout the room, giving the perfect ambience for a good night's sleep. Hitori turned her back from Kita, in an attempt to forget that she was sleeping in the same bed as her.

Hopefully Nijika-chan feels better tomorrow...

She couldn't sleep.

Her mind was too preoccupied: concern for Nijika; sprouting possibilities and 'what ifs' caused by the unaware redhead peacefully sleeping beside her; worry if she'll somehow stain the dino-pajamas she's wearing. Besides, they were sleeping at such an early time. 10pm? Baby time. She usually slept at much later times, sometimes not at all. It was amazing (and concerning) how Hitori could still function as a human being.

Having nothing better to do, Hitori sat up to... look at Nijika's things. Better do something to pass the time. She would sit up, weren't for a gravitational force pulling her down on the bed.

H-huh?

She slowly inched her head to witness the culprit, finding Kita sound asleep with her arms wrapped around her. She froze.

Well, that's what I get for picking the fluffy dinosaur pajamas.

Trying not to scream or freak out, she shakily detached Kita's arms from her, trying to ignore how soft her hands were or how nice she smelled or how much she wanted her to keep hugging her or-

Stop being weird Hitori! Err, weirder than usual. And no, she wasn't spooning you!

Free from Kita's grasp, she looked at the sleeping redhead. She still was sound asleep, rising and falling ever so slowly. It was a rare sight of Kita, one with her hair fully down and face devoid of makeup. Hitori thought she still looked pretty, even as she laid in bed.

Not wanting to keep thinking about Kita, she stood up to see Ryo. She too was sleeping peacefully, hugging one of Nijika's stuffed toys. No wonder she wanted to sleep there. Ryo had her mouth slightly open, making soft breathing noises as her chest rose and fell. She definitely was going to snore in the future. And beside her was...

Nijika-chan?

... an empty space.

M-maybe she went to the bathroom. Yeah! I'll just wait for her.

So she did. She inspected the many bits and bobs Nijika had in her bedroom. The numerous posters and pictures on her walls, papers on her desk were all interesting to the pinkhead. Compared to her own room, Nijika's seemed so lively and well-decorated. She even got to hold some of the stuffed toys that wouldn't wake Ryo.

The Ijichis love their stuffed toys. Perhaps I should take some notes. Heh, then visiting my room would be fun!

Hitori didn't know how much time had passed. Nijika didn't have a clock in her room (something that Hitori will tell her about - punctuality was important!), so she guessed she'd been standing around for 10 minutes. Ignoring the fact that she was the only awake person in the room, she started to worry about Nijika.

Maybe she actually has constipation? Oh, why didn't she tell me? I know it's embarrassing, but constipation is a big deal!

Hitori carefully tiptoed to the door and opened it slowly. Now in the hallway (thank goodness her doors aren't squeaky), she found the bathroom to be empty.

Ok, so not constipation. Maybe she got thirsty? She didn't really drink a lot today now that I think about it.

She approached the kitchen, finding it to be missing of a Nijika Ijichi.

Not the kitchen? Hmm, where could she be?

She searched the living room, making sure she (carefully) left every stone unturned. Quite literally, as she searched for Nijika under the couch and desks. She was glad her sister wasn't around, because trying to explain why you were awake and near the kitchen of

somebody else's house was a predicament she did not want to be in. To be fair, neither of the Ijichis would think of Hitori as a thief.

Actually, just Nijika wouldn't think that. Manager on the other hand...

Finding nothing (which was unsurprising - only Hitori herself can fit in such spaces), she noticed a slight breeze entering the room. The flutter of the curtains caught the ear of Hitori, where she realised that they had a balcony. She was too busy making sure she didn't crash into anything earlier that she probably didn't even notice the sliding door there.

So Nijika-chan is getting some fresh air? This is giving me some dejavu...

As Hitori got closer, she noticed the silhouette of Nijika sitting atop a stool, holding what seemed to be... a pack of cigarettes?

Oh no, she can't be smoking! Her allergies might come back! Her lungs will disintegrate! She'll die! I can't have her dying!

With one swift motion, she flung away the curtains and joined Nijika on the balcony. Reminding herself of the people still sleeping, she screeched in a hushed tone.

"N-Nijika-chan, y-you can't be s-smoking! Think o-of the-huh?" Hitori opened her eyes to meet a petrified Nijika, clutching her chest. A half-eaten choco stick was in her mouth. Hitori watched as Nijika proceeded to finish her choco stick, breathe in and out a couple of times, and pinch herself.

"Guess I'm not dreaming." Nijika muttered.

"Ah, hehe, g-good th-thing those a-aren't cigarettes, hehe..." Hitori averted her gaze. "I'll g-go to b-bed n-n-now, sorry to d-disturb."

"Wha-wait Bocchi-chan!" Nijika held Hitori's dino sleeve. "I, uhh, don't mind you staying. Couldn't sleep at all. That's what I get for

sleeping the whole day.”

“A-ah, ok.” Hitori took a seat next to the blonde. “S-sorry for scaring you...”

“It’s fine. Though not sure about my heart. Or my head.” Nijika held her forehead. “Want a stick? Got peckish.”

“Th-thanks...” Hitori took a stick and nibbled on it.

“You really thought I’d be smoking?”

“I-uhh, well. Y-you see, err. I can-”

“I’m just messing with you.” Nijika laughed at Hitori’s reaction. “Honestly, the way you think is so interesting.”

How do I respond to something like that? Was it a compliment?

“Umm... thanks?”

The two continued to sit there as the soft breeze echoed through the night. Even at the dead of night, the streets of Shimokitazawa emanated distant sounds of traffic, faint tunes of music and an assortment of other city noises. The view from the balcony wasn’t outstanding, especially on the 7th floor, so the girls looked to the skies. Clouds scattered across the black canvas as the main attraction shone brightly.

“A-are you feeling b-better, Nijika-chan?” Hitori spoke up.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Don’t worry Bocchi-chan, I’m pretty much back to normal.” Nijika gave a thumbs up. “Though, for some reason, I do kinda miss being like that. I could do whatever I want, hehe.”

“Y-yeah.” Hitori shook her head. She had to stop thinking of an alternate Nijika who hugged everyone, slurred her speech and was lazy. Essentially, a mini Hiroi with blonde hair.

Sorry onee-san. I look up to you a lot. But I also have to admit, another person like you is horrible.

Hitori shuddered. She'll have to apologise to Hiroi someday. She wouldn't get it, but at least Hitori would feel better.

They continued to bask in familiar silence. Both girls swung their legs as they shared the box of choco sticks, munching away without a care. Though they were deep in the city, stray stars could still be seen.

"I wish I could see more stars." Nijika sighed.

"Y-you can see more back i-in my place. We l-live away from the city, so the s-stars are easier to see." Hitori explained.

"Heh, that means I've got to visit you guys soon."

"H-haha, yeah..."

"Try not to decorate your room like it's a disco again."

"I-I-I won't!"

Another bout of silence was shared between the girls, before Nijika spoke to the stars.

"Hi Mom. Been a while, huh? Sorry for talking with you so late, I kinda got drugged by the blue buffoon we both love. I know you taught us to not resort to violence, but I am gonna give her a piece of my mind in the morning." Nijika said. "Don't worry Mom, the medicine was for my allergies. You always were allergic to pets, huh?"

I-is Nijika-chan hallucinating?

"A-ah." Hitori made a noise, part of her not wanting to ruin this moment and her other part wanting to ask her if she really was ok.

“Oh, sorry Bocchi-chan! Mom, you’ve met Bocchi-I mean Hitori? C’mon, introduce yourself.” Nijika nudged Hitori.

“H-hi. Hi-Hitori Gotou. Nice to m-meet you...” Hitori spoke to the stars. It felt weird to the pinkhead speaking to someone that wasn’t there, but it is a bit hypocritical compared to Hitori’s antics.

“Haha, she’s shy.” Nijika waved to nobody.

“The band’s been going well, thanks to our lead guitarist here!”

“Hehehe, eheheheh...”

“Me and Sis are doing well too. Sis recently booked a bunch of bands for Starry - Mom, you would not believe the amount of requests she had to go through. I had to learn what she usually does, and that was tough. Good thing I had my band to help out!”

Nijika went on explaining, sharing stories and conversing in the one-sided conversation. Hitori would say something or make a sound every once in a while whenever Nijika mentioned her. The odd feeling Hitori had melted away as the cheery blonde continued to talk. It was endearing to see her talk so cheerfully.

“Oh yeah, and Ryo got a cat. Well, a stray. I woke up to it on my face! It was horrible! But I’m better now, surprisingly thanks to her as well. Still gonna give her a piece of my mind...” Nijika clenched her fist.

“Nijika-chan? Di-didn’t your mother tell you to not r-resort to violence?” Hitori asked.

“For Ryo, it’s an exception. Besides, Mom agrees with me.” Nijika puffed out her chest.

“R-really?” Hitori turned to the skies.

I’m sorry your daughter has turned to violence, ma’am Ijichi!

“Anyways, that’s all I have for now Mom. Hopefully they have TV wherever you are. Then, you can see us appear there once we’ve gone big!” Nijika pumped her fist in the air. “And we will!”

“Y-yeah!” Hitori joined Nijika, which shocked the blonde. She smiled at the gesture though.

“And don’t worry Mom, I’m watching my weight. I was just feeling hungry, that’s all.” Nijika shook the empty box in her hand. “Alright, bye Mom! I love you.”

Ending her conversation, she let out a sigh.

“Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to speak that much with a headache...” Nijika held her forehead.

“Mmm.”

The two sat in silence.

“S-so-”

“You must think I’m weird.”

“Wh-wha? N-no! I think i-it’s cute. A-a-and endearing!” Hitori looked away. “S-sorry I c-can’t really re-relate.”

“Don’t be sorry, Bocchi-chan. I know she’s gone but...” Nijika took a deep breath in. “I just miss her, y’know?”

Hitori looked back at Nijika, who was getting teary-eyed.

“Heh, s-sorry. I was always the crybaby in the family, believe it or not.” Nijika wiped a stray tear.

“Th-that’s ok! I a-also cry a lot. U-usually to my-myself...” Hitori grimaced at the resurfacing memories.

“Then we’re both crybabies.”

“I guess...”

Now an awkward silence surrounded both of them.

“D-do you want a-” Hitori couldn’t finish her sentence as Nijika buried her face into her dino-pajamas, wrapping her arms around her.

“S-sorry Bocchi-chan. Just one more?” Nijika sniffed into her pajamas.

“O-ok.” Hitori returned the hug.

They sat there for a while, enjoying each other's presence. Eventually, they broke the hug.

“Th-thanks Bocchi-chan. I wish she wasn’t gone, so... so she could see all of what I’ve done. What Sis has done. What we’ve done.”

“W-well, she isn’t g-gone. Like, gone gone.”

“Huh?”

“Like s-she still lives on through you. A-and Manager too. Hopefully t-that makes sense...” Hitori planted her hand atop of Nijika’s head, rubbing her hair lightly. “I’m s-sure your mother is proud of you.”

“...”

“Nijika-chan?”

Did I go too far? Was the headpat too much? Oh no, she’s gonna be mad at me! Or depressed, which is worse! And then the-

“Bocchi-chan. I just cried a little, please d-don’t make me cry again.” Nijika said, voice shaky from holding back tears.

“A-ah, I’m sorry. I w-won’t do it ag-again! I-”

“C’mere you.” Nijika hugged Hitori again. “I know I said only one more, but I can’t help it.”

“M-must be the pajamas...” Hitori mumbled.

“Hah, yeah. And the person too.” Nijika commented, making Hitori blush.

Thank goodness she can’t see me. Go away, blush! Go away! Shoo!

“I can’t thank you enough, Bocchi-chan.” Nijika said, breaking off the hug and getting a good look at Hitori.

She looks cute in that pajamas. Maybe she should keep it.

“A-anytime?” Hitori replied with a tilt of her head.

“Pft, why did you say that with a question mark?” Nijika lightly slapped Hitori’s shoulder.

“I dunno. Is t-that what I’m supposed to s-say?” Hitori rubbed her shoulder.

“We can work on that later.”

“G-gotcha.”

Nijika hopped off her stool. She tossed her empty box at the nearby trash can.

“Let’s head to bed, Bocchi-chan. I’m not a night owl.” Nijika yawned.

“S-sure.”

Hitori hopped off her stool and joined Nijika heading back to the bedroom. But not before Hitori turned back to look at the night sky. The same clouds still floated above as the same stars twinkled afar. Yet, she could have sworn the breeze blew slightly harder as Nijika talked with her mother.

“Morning everyone!” Kita greeted the group, already pampering herself with her numerous face products.

“Mmmmgh.” Ryo grunted.

“Ryo, let go of me. I need to cook breakfast!” Nijika squirmed in Ryo’s arms.

“Mmm... don’t wanna.”

“So, you don’t want to eat my amazing food? What a shame.” Nijika teased.

Immediately Ryo tossed Nijika off the bed and sprang up. Said blonde fell on top of Hitori, who was startled out of her slumber.

“Why would I miss out on that?” Ryo proudly proclaimed. “Now, where’s the food?”

“Ugh, I said I need to cook it first.” Nijika rubbed her butt. “You ok, Bocchi-chan?”

“Y-yes.” Hitori stretched in her dino-pajamas. It was a bit hard to stretch in the suit as she struggled to stretch out her limbs.

“Right. First.” Nijika turned on Ryo and gave her a swift gut punch, sending her slightly flying back onto the bed.

“Ijichi-senpai!” Kita gasped.

“She deserves it, and you know it.”

Kita thought about it, coming to an agreement with the blonde.

“Ehh, true.”

“... I haven’t *cough* recovered from...” Ryo coughed and heaved.
“... from the last one... oww.”

Not dead though. Another point to Ryo's amazing body. Though I might have a broken rib or two...

"Second. I am so, so sorry Kita-chan for how I was acting yesterday." Nijika bowed to Kita.

"Aww, it's fine Ijichi-senpai! We all found it cute anyways. Maybe a bit annoying, yeah. But cute! Feel free to be as touchy as you want! I don't mind!" Kita beamed at Nijika, who squinted a bit. Getting her aura first thing in the morning hits especially harder than usual.

"T-thanks." The blonde slightly blushed.

"Glad to see you're doing better now!"

"Yeah. Good to be back! Though maybe we should take it easy today. I just recovered anyway."

"... th-thanks to meeeeeee..." Ryo weakly raised her hand, before flopping it back onto the bed.

"She's gonna be out for a while." Nijika sighed.

"Y-yeah." Hitori said, finally standing up with the other girls.

May I never be on the receiving end of Nijika-chan's punches. Never ever.

That ends Chapter 5.

Writing Nijika in a more goofy manner is funny. I always thought that she was kinda goofy, so it seemed natural to write her even more so.

The scene with Nijika talking with her mom, that was the main reason I went with a sleepover. Bocchi do be helping people with their problems fr fr. Also the Sharknado stuff, I made up. Never watched a single movie.

Sorry again for the lack of Nijicat. The feline will return. Hopefully, I dunno.

Drunk bassist mentioned! Guess I gotta add her to the character list.

Next chapter whenever!

Chapter 6

Chapter 9: Chapter 6

The band have a normal day with Nijicat. Kita and Ryo talk. Riveting stuff.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“So, you’re saying that you managed to teach Nijicat to climb seven floors, open a closed window and specifically sleep on my face?”

“Yep.”

“If you’re gonna lie, Ryo, at least put more effort into making it believable.”

“But it’s true. Ask my cat later.”

“Ughhh.”

Nijika groaned as she walked with Ryo to Starry. Ryo was just done explaining how Nijicat ended up in their apartment, being an entirely fabricated story made by the bassist. Of course, nothing would convince her that the story was completely bogus, so Nijika decided to accept it as fact. Wouldn’t change anything really. She still deserved that gut punch.

“Although, you could lay off from physically hurting me. My stomach’s still sore...” Ryo rubbed her belly.

“Isn’t it a good thing that my strength is back?” Nijika prodded at Ryo’s stomach, who flinched. “Aaaaand, you totally deserve it.”

“Nijika, I’ve been eating nothing but grass the entire week. Well, until we had that sleepover. Anyways, yeah. Another punch and I’ll probably die.” Ryo pleaded.

“Hmm, what song should we play at your funeral?” Nijika pondered.

“There’s too many to choose from.”

“And when do you want to have it?” Nijika poked Ryo’s stomach.

“Preferably never, please.”

The duo laughed. As Starry came into their view, a familiar feline was waiting by the stairs. Nijika instinctively put on a mask. She carries a few in case of situations like this. It was a little precautious, even for Nijika, but doesn’t hurt to be careful.

“Hey Nijicat. Good kitty, waiting out here.” Ryo knelt down to pet Nijicat. She smiled when the cat meowed in glee.

“Hehe, yeah. Good kitty...” Nijika trailed off.

“I was gonna ask if we could have Nijicat in our practice, but maybe after another week?” Ryo turned to the blonde.

“Why?”

“I don’t want you getting sick ag-”

“No, I mean why bring the cat into practice?”

“Improves band morale.”

“I improve band morale. Wait.” Nijika paused. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“But with two Nijikas-I mean, with Nijicat,” Ryo corrected, earning a glare from Nijika. “we’d be in high spirits.”

Nijika was still not convinced.

“I-I also need to keep an eye on my cat?”

Still not convinced.

“If you love me, y-you’d-”

“Pfft, hahahah! Just messing with you. Hold on, let me tell Sis to put on a mask.” Nijika patted Ryo’s shoulder as she disappeared into Starry. “Although kinda cheap to pull the ‘if you love me’ card.”

Ryo sighed as she continued to give scratches to Nijicat.

“Great job passing the exam, Hitori-chan!”

“Hehehehehehe, eheheh, y-yeah. G-go me, heheheheheh...”

The guitarist pair were on their way to Starry, the redhead rewarding the pinkhead with some well-earned headpats. They recently had a surprise exam, thankful that they studied during the weekend. Though neither of them got high marks, they were happy to have passed. Kita was more happy for Hitori to pass.

“The sleepover we had really helped, huh?” Kita stopped patting Hitori’s head.

“M-mhmm. I n-normally don’t get that m-much studying done.”

More importantly, I had my first ever successful sleepover! Nice one, Hitori! I’m nailing this ‘friends’ thing! Sooner or later, I’ll evolve. I’ll level up. And besides, the sleepover was fun. Real fun! And, Kita-san even w-was able t-to-

“Wah!” Hitori yelled as she got yanked to the side.

“Geez Hitori-chan, watch where you’re going. You nearly crashed into that pole.” Kita shook her head, letting go of Hitori’s sleeve.

Hitori looked to her side to find the pole. She shuddered at the image of slamming head first into it.

“Haha, yeah. Totally wasn’t thinking about when you were hugging me while we slept, haha! Yeah! I wasn’t doing that! Whaaaa, me? Doing that? No way? Haha, yeah... yeah, I was doing that. Sorry. A-and thanks.” Hitori spat out, going through a rollercoaster of emotions.

“O-oh.” Kita looked away, tinted with red. She ignored most of the rollercoaster Hitori rode on. “S-sorry Hitori-chan. I usually hug something w-while I sleep. A-and you just happened to be quite f-f-fluffy.”

“Y-yeah. I-uhh-I’d be lying if I s-said I didn’t l-l-like it...”

The two continued to walk with averted gazes, too embarrassed and blushing to speak to the other. Their heads conjured a multitude of thoughts.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-Why did I say that? She must think I’m weird! Weirder than she normally puts up with. Oh no, then she’ll leave the band because she doesn’t want to be with someone as weird as me! Then the others will kick me out for being weird and weirding Kita-san out!

Did she just admit she liked it? Oh my gosh, she’s soooo cute! I know she was touch-starved, but I didn’t know she was this bad. Should I keep it up? Or give her space? I want to respect her boundaries, mostly to keep her together and not on the floor or walls, but Ijichi-senpai wasn’t kidding when she said that she was soft. Aghh, I can’t-

“Woah!” Kita screamed as she was now in the arms of Hitori. She looked at Hitori with a look of confusion.

“A-ah, y-y-you nearly w-walked i-into a p-p-pole. Thisisntanexcusetohugyouoranything!” Hitori trembled as she

blushed, nearly dropping the redhead. She placed Kita next to her and dove her hands into her pockets, now really interested in the wall to the right. It looked really... wall-like.

"Hehe, s-smooth. Using w-what I did earlier." Kita glanced at the nearby pole. "Th-thanks."

That did not stop the two from blushing - really, it made it worse.

As they approached Starry, they found Ryo petting Nijicat. She seemed serene, smiling softly at the feline. The sight almost made them not want to go to work to continue witnessing such a peaceful view. Until Ryo noticed them.

"Hey Ikuyo, Bocchi. You two look like tomatoes. Did you guys make out or what?" Ryo asked nonchalantly.

"Ryo-senpai!" / "N-no!"

"And you both answered at the same time, sheesh. When's the marriage?" Ryo teased.

"W-well, it is pretty hot today, isn't it? Phew! R-right Hitori?" Kita said, airing her shirt. She slightly hit Hitori with her elbow.

Hopefully she gets it.

"A-ah, yeah! Look, I-I'm evaporating a-away..." Hitori spoke softly as her body began to evaporate in front of both of them.

"Hitori-chan! No!" Kita tried to grab what's left of Hitori, but alas! She has fully converted into gas. Somehow.

"I should stop being surprised that Bocchi can do stuff like this." Ryo stated.

"Ryo-senpai, you gotta help!" Kita grabbed Ryo and began to shake her.

“Ikuyo. How?” Ryo said as she rocked back and forth. “I’m dizzy. Please stop.”

Nijicat leapt from Ryo’s arms and swatted at the general area where Hitori used to be. The girl materialised back into her usual form, scurrying away from the cat.

“P-p-please not the s-shoes! I j-just got new ones!” Hitori backpedalled, bowing towards Nijicat. “I-if you want, I c-can offer my life in-instead! Just not the sh-shoes!”

“And she’s back to normal. Amazing.” Ryo pointed to the pinkhead on the floor, bowing to her cat. “I should be taking notes. Maybe make a thesis.”

“Oh, thank goodness. Hitori-chan, get off the floor! We still have work and practice!” Kita grabbed Hitori and dragged her back to Starry.

“Good job Nijicat. Extra treats later.” Ryo petted Nijicat, who promptly returned to her arms.

“Nijicat sure is useful when it’s needed, huh?” Kita commented. “Now c’mon Hitori-chan, I can’t keep dragging you.”

“Unng, hnnng, t-too embarrassing... I w-wanna wither a-away...” Hitori croaked.

“Aww, Hitori-chan!” Kita pouted, before her face coloured like her hair as she whispered, “I’ll give you headpats and hugs later.”

“AH!” Hitori perked up and sped past the two girls, already in the live house before the two could even blink.

“Umm, what did you say to her?” Ryo plopped Nijicat back on the ground, letting the cat walk into Starry. She tapped Kita’s shoulder. “You guys gonna make out later?”

“Ryo-senpai.” Kita lowly said, her usual cheery aura turning into something sinister. “Say that one more time, and I’ll make sure you

can't eat anything but grass."

"L-like you'll give me a whole field of grass? I appreciate the offer, but I already eat my grass from the outskirts of Shimokitazawa. You should try some, it's-"

Kita's fist was inches away from Ryo's stomach. The bassist didn't even realise it was there until she blinked, where she took a step back from the redhead.

Remember what I said before? That we might actually die? Yeah, let's not. Thanks Ryo.

"I meant it." Kita grunted, before putting her fist down and descending into Starry.

Ryo stayed behind to catch her breath.

"A-at least I'm a-alive, haha. Ha. Haahhh..." Ryo shambled into Starry, holding onto the handrail so she wouldn't faint.

"Hi Kita-chan! A-and Ryo? You alright?!" Nijka greeted the pair as they entered. Hitori was already inside, mulling in her safe space: the Starry garbage bin.

"Yeah, she's fine!" Kita patted Ryo on the back. A lot harder than expected as the poor bassist almost lost her balance.

"R-really? She looks like she saw her life flash before her eyes." Nijka pointed at Ryo's eyes, which began to swirl.

"Haha, yeah. Guess you could say that..." Ryo muttered.

"Well, if you say so. Try not to die, Ryo! We need our bassist alive and healthy! Err, relatively healthy."

"Kinda hard with you two..." Ryo whispered under her breath.

“Hmm? Did you say something, Ryo-senpai?” Kita asked. Ryo could have sworn she saw her eyes glimmer.

“N-nothing. Just catching my breath.” Ryo cleared her throat. “Oh yeah, where’s Nijicat?”

Nijika gestured to the garbage bin.

“St-stay back! P-please spare m-me!” Hitori’s cries could be heard from the bin.

“And she was just saying she wanted to offer her life to Nijicat.” Kita facepalmed.

“What?” Nijika turned to the redhead.

“Though I am glad she values her life! Ryo-senpai, help me get your cat out of the bin and I’ll get our Hitori-chan out.”

“Say no more.”

“Wait, Kita-chan. She wanted to wha-ugh, nevermind.” Nijika gave up as she watched Kita and Ryo vacate Hitori from her ‘shell’.

Sounds like typical Bocchi Time. At least that hasn’t been happening lately. I think.

A little bit of prodding and many promises that Nijicat isn’t out for her soul, Hitori popped out.

“Th-thanks. I j-just don’t like it w-when Nijicat goes f-for the shoes. And it only d-does that w-with me...” Hitori said as she got up with the help of Kita.

“Huh, yeah. Now that you point that out, Hitori-chan, it is a bit strange. What’s with that, Ryo-senpai?” Kita asked.

“Honestly, I have no idea. Bocchi, what kinda shoes you wear?” Ryo bent down to inspect Hitori’s kicks.

“N-n-normal shoes? I don’t know, I’m s-sorry...” Hitori squeaked.

“We should-Ryo-senpai, stop inspecting them like they’re ancient fossils.” Kita swatted Ryo’s hand away from Hitori’s shoes.

“Anyways, we should go shopping someday Hitori-chan!”

“Ughhh... crowds... b-bright people... walking... rather s-stay inside...” Hitori hung her head low.

“Bocchi-chan’s shoes are fine, Kita-chan.” Nijika patted Kita’s shoulder. “Though I have to agree, some new shoes would look good on you Bocchi-chan.

“Urk!”

I’ll be dreading that day. Maybe I can find a good dress to die in too. Got to look good on my funeral, right? Hehe, heh.

“The bigger issue here is Ryo,” Nijika pointed to the bassist, who pointed at herself in confusion, “yeah you, not being a responsible cat owner.”

“Tsk ts, Ryo-senpai. As its owner, you have to take better care of Nijicat.” Kita crossed her arms and shook her head.

“What do you want me to do, walk Nijicat into a shoe store and teach it to refrain from scratching any of them?” Ryo spitballed. A eureka moment then occurred. “Actually, that doesn’t sound that bad of an idea.”

Another point to Ryo’s amazing and hilarious brain. Oh yeah.

“Anything to keep Bocchi-chan’s heartrate steady whenever Nijicat’s nearby.” Nijika said.

“D-does my heartrate actually d-do that?” Hitori placed her hand on her chest, feeling the rapid hammering. “W-wow, y-yeah it d-does that...”

You learn about yourself everyday, I guess. Kind of weird now that I think that, I shapeshift all the time...

“Really?” Kita placed her ear on Hitori’s chest. “Hmm, you’re right. Your heart is beating insanely fast! A little bit too fast, wow. Are you alright, Hitori-chan?”

“M-mmhm! Y-y-yeah, ahahaha. Nothing w-wrong with me! Hahah, hah...” Hitori stepped back and vigorously nodded her head, hoping that the forming blush would go away.

“O-oh. Sorry...” Kita noticed her blush and backed off as well, slightly blushing herself.

“Oi, girls. You guys gonna work or do I have to dock your salaries?” Seika hollered from the bar.

“Manager, don’t be too mean to them!” PA-san could be faintly heard from her booth.

“Well, you heard my sister. Let’s get to work!” Nijika pumped her fist in the air. The others followed suit. “I guess Nijicat can stay too.”

“Sick.” Ryo scooped Nijicat and held the cat. “Now try not to annoy anyone, ok Nijicat? Behave and those extra treats later will triple.”

“Since when did you have the funds for treats?” Nijika whistled.

Ryo looked to Nijika, then to Hitori and Kita, before looking back at Nijika.

“Why did I ever think otherwise...” Nijika grumbled.

Another day of work, and another day of Hitori pushing herself. She was currently with Nijika in manning the bar, with Ryo and Kita on their break. She was getting better with making drinks, not needing Nijika to remind her where each thing was. Hitori was also getting

marginally better at 'talking to strangers', which Nijika had to reword to 'customer service'. Nijika didn't know how Hitori was able to vilify such a normal part of society. Then again, it was Hitori.

"Good job Bocchi-chan! You talked to, like," Nijika counted with her hands. "five people? Without even needing my help!"

"I-i-it's actually m-more like six..." Hitori murmured from under the bar, recuperating herself.

"Even better! Ah, here's your drink! Enjoy!" Nijika handed the drink to a customer, then directed her attention to the pink blob on the floor. "One step at a time, Bocchi-chan."

"Y-yeah. Thanks." Hitori looked up with a soft smile.

"Besides, you didn't even mess up their orders!" Nijika said as she put on a new mask. She still had to be wary of Nijicat. Not like it was the cat's fault. Technically, it kind of was.

"Hahah, ehehehe, yeaha I d-didn't... go meee... whoo..." Hitori celebrated, weakly raising her arms.

"You, uhh, rest... there? Yeah. I'll handle the rest of the customers until you're ready to help out again." Nijika patted Hitori on the head.

"Hehehe, a-alright... hehehe." Hitori giggled.

Meanwhile, the two girls on their break were chilling near the staircase. They settled to have pineapple juice for drinks, considering that the Starry supply of it never seemed to run out. Though the sour punch the drinks had brought distaste to the duo, they were just glad to have something to drink. They were conversing on the different stories of Nijicat, the redhead finding each one adorable while the bluehead taking in all of the praise as Nijicat's proud owner.

“Nijicat can really do a backflip?” Ryo asked, impressed that her feline friend can achieve such a feat.

“W-well, no. But, I’ll tell you what Ryo-senpai. Nijicat really tried!” Kita exclaimed. “Cats leap better forwards than backwards, y’know?”

“Yeah.”

Isn’t that with all animals?

“Everyone loves Nijicat, hmm?” Ryo sighed, taking a sip of her pineapple juice. She hoped that the melted ice would make it less sour, but her scrunched up face says otherwise.

“Yup! Nijicat is surprisingly well-behaved around people, especially for a stray. The people here love the cat!”

“Only because the owner is-”

“Don’t push it.” Kita’s grip on her plastic cup tightened.

“Y-yes.”

Kita took a swig of her drink, gagged at how sour it was, before continuing to speak.

“Hitori-chan’s doing pretty well at the bar.” Kita gestured to where Nijika and Hitori were, the former gleefully taking orders while the latter was curled up on the bar floor. It probably should not be alarming that Hitori can practically sleep anywhere. Maybe her tracksuit really was that soft.

“Mmm.” Ryo sipped. Her tongue got used to the sourness.

“Maybe a week from now and she’ll be unrecognisable with how much she’s been improving lately.”

“Mhmm.” Another sip. Okay, now the juice practically tasted like water.

“Ahh, I’m so proud of her! It makes my heart swell when I see her! Kyaa!”

“You sound like her mother.”

“Ack! *cough* w-well, yeah! I’m happy that she’s improving herself.” Kita choked on her drink, beating her chest to clear her throat. “She’s a big inspiration for me to improve as a member of the band.”

“Yeah, I get ya.” Another sip. Actually, it tasted a bit sweet with a hint of sourness. The ice was a success.

Hmm.

“Hey, Ikuyo. You don’t mind me asking you something?”

“Sure! Anything!” Kita faceblasted Ryo with her aura. She nearly spilled her drink.

“Y-yeah. So.” Ryo started to shed tears. “I-I noticed th-that *sniff* you’ve been p-paying more at-attention to Bocchi. *sniff* A-am I... not g-good enough for you?”

“H-huh? What do you mean, Ryo-sen-”

Kita got cut off by the cries of Ryo as she essentially tackled Kita in a bear hug. She was more amazed Ryo managed to keep her drink in her cup and sob into Kita. Talk about multitasking.

“Ryo-senpai! P-people are looking...” Kita whispered as she felt the sparse stares of onlookers.

“Let them look.” Ryo said, low and husky.

Smooth Ryo. Thanks Ryo.

“Look at me punching the lights out of you?” Kita whispered in Ryo’s ear.

Aaaaaaaaand time to back off. Since when was she this scary...

“Ok, joke’s over.” Ryo detached herself from the redhead in a blink of an eye, chugging down what’s left of her drink.

“Sorry, Ryo-senpai. Was that too much?” Kita asked, almost innocently.

“S-still have PTSD from the last two gut punches, so yes. Very much so.” Ryo hugged her stomach.

“Hehe, Ijichi-senpai’s right. You’re fun to tease.” Kita poked at Ryo’s cheek, who responded in a grumble and a small blush on her face.

I got her to blush! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh, the gap!

“A-anyways.” Ryo composed herself. “I was gonna ask you something. Really.”

“Oh? Go ahead then!”

“I noticed that you’ve been less fawning over me and more, uhh... ‘speaking your own mind’ towards me. I don’t mind it, really I don’t. I do kinda deserve it.” Ryo admitted. “So, I just wanted to... you ok Ikuyo?”

“Mhmm, y-yes! Mi-might be the pineapple juice o-or something, surely that ca-causes heartburn or something? Haha, yeah. Go on!” Kita waved Ryo to continue, clutching her chest with her other hand.

*Now she’s being honest! When she’s usually trying to be cool!
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, my heart can’t handle it!*

Ryo raised an eyebrow.

Doesn’t pineapple juice help lower heart diseases? Mental note, must search up later.

“O... kay? Anyways, yeah. Just wanted to ask what’s up with the sudden change.” Ryo said

“Ah. Hmm, now that you mention it, it was kind of sudden. And obvious.” Kita thought about it.

“Not really. I only noticed since you haven’t lended me money in ages.”

Kita shot a disappointed look.

Typical Ryo-senpai.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Really.”

Tough crowd.

“Well, you gonna explain yourself?” Ryo asked.

“Right!” Kita drank the rest of her drink. “Gak! Ugh, I shouldn’t have done that...”

“It isn’t so bad.”

“Really?”

“Yep. The melted ice makes it taste better.”

“Hmmm...” Kita pondered, smacking her lips. “You’re right, it does taste better wh-”

“So you actually going to talk about it or are we gonna continue beating around the bush?” Ryo sassed.

“But! You! Ughhhhh.” Kita held herself back from strangling the bassist. “You know, if you weren’t so annoying sometimes, I actually would have continued to swoon over you.”

“So who are you and what have you done with the real Ikuyo?” Ryo backed off for dramatic effect.

“I am the real Ik-Kita Kita.” Kita corrected herself. “I don’t know, I guess I just... got to know you better.”

Ryo cut the theatrics and scooted closer to Kita.

“You know at first, I joined the band because you were so, so cool. And hot.” Kita started.

“I still am. Both of those things actually.”

“Don’t make me slap you.” Kita sighed as she continued. “But, as I spent more time with you all, not only has my purpose for being in Kessoku Band changed but also I got to really know you. You know the saying, ‘Don’t meet your heroes.’? Well, that kinda happened with you.”

Ryo nodded.

“I noticed your flaws. Like how you’re horrible with money, or how your cool looks usually come from an empty head, or how sometimes egotistical you can be, or how-”

“Ok, ok, I get it.” Ryo placed her hand on Kita’s mouth. “I suck. Sorry.”

Kita removed Ryo’s hand from her mouth. “Don’t be. It adds to your charm.”

“Huh?”

“Sure, you might be all those things, but you also compose all of our songs. That’s a big feat! I can’t imagine doing that myself! And you also help Hitori-chan with lyrics. You’re the most musically talented person in the band too! You’re amazing on the bass! A-and, you still do look cool. We should go shopping sometime! You gotta show me where you get your clothes!”

“H-heh, yeah...” Ryo responded, too overwhelmed by the genuine praise given by Kita. “Thanks.”

“Hehe, I guess I still am fawning over you a liiiittle bit. Oh well.”

Both girls laughed.

“By the way, when you said ‘it adds to your charm’? That’s what Nijika told me before.” Ryo chuckled. She smiled at the memory.

“R-really? Am I becoming like her?” Kita gasped.

“Hmm, well, you’re violent to me, wisecrack at times to me, and like to tease me.” Ryo counted with her fingers. “All you’re missing now is a set of drumsticks and to call me ‘dumb bassist’. Or, maybe ‘blue buffoon’ suits you better? Sounds funnier.”

“Oh, stop it you.” Kita lightly punched Ryo.

“Ow.”

“That didn’t even hurt.”

“Heh.”

“Mmmmm...” Kita murmured. “So, what I’m saying is that you got lowered from ‘idol crush’ to ‘friend and bandmate’.”

“Honestly, that’s more of an upgrade.” Ryo smiled. “Though, I am going to miss you lending money to me.”

“Who said I wasn’t?” Kita said, which made Ryo perk up. “Not all the time though. Only when you really need it, Ryo-senpai.”

“Aww.”

“Like Ijichi-senpai would probably put it, ‘You need to have better financial responsibility!’” Kita imitated Nijika’s voice.

“Not bad.” Ryo applauded.

“Thank you. I learned from the best.” Kita bowed. She then extended a hand to Ryo. “I am glad to have met you, Ryo-senpai!”

Ryo looked at the hand for a moment.

Friends, huh. This is nice.

“Likewise, Kita.” Ryo shook Kita’s hand, before snickering. “Sorry, this is a bit formal, don’t you think?”

“It was a spur of the moment! It would have been more awkward to just say that to you, y’know!” Kita fired back.

“Oh, and you can drop the senpai. Now that you’re not in love with me anymore. **sniff**” Ryo wiped a non-existent tear from her face.

“Shut it you.”

Ryo checked her phone.

“C’mon, our break’s nearly over.” Ryo began to walk over to the bar.

“Huh, didn’t think you’d be excited to work!” Kita joined Ryo.

“Can’t get paid if I wasn’t.”

“Ah. Makes sense now.”

Seeing the two girls coming back from their break, Nijika waved. Ryo and Kita waved back.

“Hey guys! Guessing our shift is nearly over?” Nijika asked.

“Yup.”

“We’ll take it from here, Nijika-chan!” Kita said, then realising what she said. “Oh gosh, I’m sorry, does that sound weird?”

“Nah, not at all! Feel free to drop the senpai for me.”

Kita nodded.

Ahh. This feels... nice.

“Alright, c’mon Bocchi-chan! Up you go!” Nijika lugged a sleepy Hitori on her shoulder. “She worked pretty hard today. Fifteen people! And without collapsing too! Can you believe it?”

“Woah! Great job Hitori-chan!” Kita gave the sleepy pinkhead a headpat.

“... hehe... ehehe... heh...” Hitori barely got out.

“Good job Bocchi.” Ryo gave a thumbs up.

“You know, Ryo. I never thought you actually would tend the bar.” Nijika said.

“Eh, needed a change of pace. Besides, free drinks.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on her. We won’t be drinking anything, it’s for the customers! Right, Ryo-chan?” Kita smirked at Ryo.

“R-right.”

“Glad you see her for who she truly is, Kita-chan.” Nijika gave an approving pat on the shoulder to Kita. “You might have to teach her basically everything. This is her first time tending the bar.”

“Noted, Nijika-chan!” Kita saluted to the blonde, who headed off to a nearby table to set down Hitori.

“... Ryo-chan? Mmm... Nijika-chan?” Hitori semi-asked and semi-mumbled.

“Yeah, Bocchi-chan. Guess Kita-chan is more comfy with us now.” Nijika smiled as she watched the redhead and bluehead manage the

bar. Kita was currently showing where everything was, with Ryo almost falling asleep.

“Heh, y-yay...” Hitori hummed.

It was then Nijicat joined the two on the table.

“O-oh, hey Nijicat.” Hitori yonked the cat and planted her head on it. “You’re fluffy, hehehe...”

The cat tried its hardest to escape Hitori’s grasp, but to no avail. Nijicat ended up accepting its current predicament and curled up. It could use the nap anyways.

Nijika watched as Hitori drifted to sleep, the slow rise and fall of her body following shortly after. She couldn’t help giving the sleeping girl a pat on the head.

“Get some rest, Bocchi-chan. You’ve earned it.”

Nijika then sighed and slumped on a chair. She too was tired.

We’re probably not going to practise today, huh.

She glanced back at the bar. Now Kita was showing Ryo how to make the basic drinks, with Ryo clueless as ever and out of her element. She looked back at Hitori, still peacefully sleeping.

That’s ok. It was a great day today anyways.

Originally, this was supposed to be sorta like a filler chapter, since the well was dry. But then I thought how I've been writing Kita to be kinda like Nijika in some ways, so the conversation between Ryo and Kita happened. I do like this development, they're more like friends now. Personally, felt like it was natural for Kita to go that way.

Bocchi do be character developing in the background fr fr.

Also, Nijicat's back. I'll try to find ways to keep the cat in future chapters. The whole title of this fic wouldn't make sense otherwise.

Next chapter whenever! Might be longer than usual, need to think of more funny ideas.

Chapter 7 (part 1)

Chapter 10: Chapter 7 (part 1)

Nijika and Hitori talk about their bassist and guitarist. More Nijicat.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Ahhh. I could get used to this.

Ryo sat in the mostly-empty Starry, aside from PA-san in her usual corner scrolling on her phone. She decided to come to Starry early, lying to herself that she was excited for early practice when in reality she wanted to spend more time with her cat. Ryo didn't know where else to find Nijicat; it seems that staying by Starry everyday was hard coded into the feline at this point. So, spending more time petting Nijicat meant she somehow had to beat Nijika and the others to Starry.

And Ryo did this with a car. Her family's car.

Her parents drove her from school to Starry. Sure, a bit much for cat petting, but Ryo thought it was worth it. Although, her parents were always enthusiastic about it, dropping whatever they were doing in the hospital to drive their daughter somewhere when said daughter could just... walk. She kept reminding her parents that it was fine if they couldn't drive her if ever the hospital needed them, but Ryo half-knew what she said went in one ear and out the other.

Perhaps being stubborn runs in the Yamada family.

Anyways, here Ryo is, in the middle of ruffling the fur of Nijicat, who has elected to loaf on one of the Starry tables, snoozing in peace. Ryo could feel how much better the cat's fur had gotten, now that

she took care of Nijicat from time to time. All the brushing and feeding has paid off, and the owner felt like she was reaping what she had sown. And sown well she did.

Ryo never thought she'd ever touch something so soft. While she was alright with her formed calluses on her fingers, they always muted her sense of touch by a little bit - enough to bother her. Something incredibly fluffy to the normal person may be passable softness to Ryo. She paid not much mind to this, seeing as she wasn't a 'fluffy and hugs' kind of person. But, fluffy stuff is fluffy stuff. So, she continued to run her fingers through the softness, letting her fingers take in the fluff. It was addicting. She wanted more. She could do this forever in blissful serenity. Just a few more ruffles and she'd achieve inner peace.

Then she looked to her left and had to squint her eyes.

"Kita?" Ryo squeaked, slightly startled at the staring redhead.

"O-oh. Hey Ryo-chan!" Kita waved, her sparkling eyes reverting to normal.

"How long have you been there?"

"Mmmm, dunno. A while?"

"She's been standing there for around four minutes." PA-san yelled from her booth.

"And you didn't say anything?" Ryo asked PA-san, hand still magnetised to the cat.

"You looked so peaceful!"

"I know, right? That's why I was staring!" Kita agreed.

"And Kita-chan had her... y'know." PA-san added, gesturing around her. Kita tilted her head in confusion. "Nevermind."

Ah, right. She wouldn't get it.

"Anyways, what're you doing here so early? The others aren't here yet and we don't start practising until they arrive." Ryo turned to Kita.

"I could ask the same for you. And I did run into Nijika-chan and Hitori-chan! They're getting drinks." Kita replied.

"Hmm. Well, it's obvious why I'm here early." Ryo pointed to her cat, keeping her occupied hand petting the feline.

"You... wanted to help set up? I never thought I'd see the day." Kita started to tear up, sniffing rather loudly.

"Hey, that's my thing. Cut it out."

"Says who?" Kita stuck her tongue out.

"Says me. And what I say is always right."

"Ehh, I'd say it's mostly right." PA-san hollered. "You could argue for 'sometimes right' though."

"Hmm, I was thinking more of 'never right'." Kita voiced her thoughts.

"C'mon, give me a little credit Kita. When have I ever been wrong?" Ryo smirked.

Her smirk began to waver as Kita shook her head.

"Don't answer that."

"I wasn't going toooo~" Kita sang.

Ryo laughed a little. It was nice to have banter with Kita, instead of the usual 'Kita agrees with Ryo' shtick. As much as she appreciated the one-sided attention, even she had to admit it went out of hand. Or maybe Nijika's ramblings are starting to make sense.

“Oh yeah! When I did meet with the two, Nijika-chan was kinda bummed that you weren’t walking with them. I guess you two always walk here together, huh? Like me and Hitori-chan!” Kita said.

Ryo hummed.

Guess she misses me. I’ll make it up to her. It is kinda cute too.

“Mmm. I’ll walk with her tomorrow. She can be such a child sometimes.”

“Right? She always acts as our leader and the backbone of the band, yet she has her moments where she wants to be spoiled. It’s sooooo cute!”

“Who you calling cute?” a voice shouted from the steps. The two girls turned to see Nijika and Hitori enter, holding lemonade and cola respectively.

“You, Nijika. You’re cute.” Ryo said as if it was fact.

At least being this smooth works on Nijika. Plus one to Yamada.

“O... oh. Th-thanks. B-but flattery won’t get you any brownie points!” The blonde blushed and yelled back.

“Brownies? Where?”

Nijika facepalmed. “Kita-chan.”

“On it!” Kita saluted, before whacking Ryo on the back.

“Ow. Not my fault I eat grass most of the time.”

“It is your fault. And Kita-chan? Thank you.”

Hitori shuddered.

Now Kita-san's getting physical too! Oh, the horror of extroverts! May I never get on their bad side. Never ever.

“Bocchi-chan, you good?” Nijika asked the shivering girl.

“M-mmhmm! N-n-nothing’s wrong Ijichi-ma’am-ch-chan!” Hitori bowed.

“Uhh... there, there?” Nijika headpatted the pinkhead, who began to giggle under the affection.

Well, she’s not offering her life. That’s progress!

“Right!” Kita clapped her hands. “Let’s get to work guys!”

“Yeah!”

“Yup.”

“Ah, y-yes ma’am-Kita-san.”

With everyone set, they began to... wait.

“Kita-chan. Isn’t today a free day?” Nijika asked. “Sis isn’t even here. We came here to practise on the big stage. That’s why PA-san is here.”

“You guys forgot?” PA-san shouted. Though she could have walked over to ask, her body was melded with her chair and she accepted her fate. Maybe she could learn a thing or two from her beloved potted plant.

“Ahh! Whoops, my bad!” Kita slightly bowed. “Force of habit, hehe.”

Kita cleared her throat before announcing, “Let’s set up and get ready to rock and roll!”

“Yeah! That’s more like it!”

“Yup.”

“Ah, y-yes Kita-san...”

“Meow!”

Their jam session was a success. Some refinements on previous songs, a little run through on Ryo's barebones instrumental on their soon-to-be formalised new song, a snack break (Seika came in later with cookies - to nobody's surprise, Ryo inhaled nearly all of them) in between and a final cleanup marks the end of the day.

“Ryo, you could've stopped getting Nijicat to play the drums after the third time.” Nijika muttered as she kept hold of Ryo. Before the bassist was rudely interrupted, she was trying to get her cat atop one of the drums with Nijika's drumsticks to play a sound. Even if it wasn't one that the drum normally makes; anything to showcase how awesome, cool and spectacular Nijicat is.

“Y-yeah, Ryo-san. Th-this is, umm...” Hitori paused to count with her fingers. “... like, your seventh t-time?”

“You know Ryo-chan. Anything she sets her mind on, she won't stop at nothing to accomplish. Remarkable!” Kita exclaimed. “Er, when it counts. Kinda like you, Hitori-chan!”

“Ehehehehe, hehe, thanks...”

“Urk! Why are you so adamant about this anyways?” Nijika asked, relieved when Ryo finally stopped squirming.

“Because Bocchi tried this before. I can't have Nijicat's first instrument lesson be stolen by her.”

“H-huh?” The pinkhead shrieked, more on that she was mentioned.

“Bocchi-chan? Why?” Nijika turned to Hitori.

“W-w-well, I was tr-trying to cheer up Kita-san, a-and it w-was her idea a-a-anyways! Sorry, Kita-san! Sorry!” Hitori answered, clasping her hands in front of Kita.

“Ah, i-it’s ok Hitori-chan! It worked! I think? But don’t feel bad.” Kita consoled the guitarist. “It’s the thought that counts!”

“Yup! Thanks again for that, Bocchi-chan. Kita-chan is an essential part of this band!” Nijika shouted. “And don’t you forget that, Kita-chan!”

“I won’t!”

The girls cleaned up a bit more, with their respective instruments - minus Nijika - in their cases.

“Ah, Kita. Let’s go. We have to work on our thingy.” Ryo poked Kita’s shoulder.

“Hmm? Oh, that! Sure, Ryo-chan!” Kita nodded.

“Weird way of saying ‘date’.” Nijika quipped. She meant it as a joke, but started to think otherwise when Kita blushed.

“D-d-date?!?” Hitori yelled, fainting onto the floor shortly after.

“N-n-no Hitori-chan! It’s just our secret project we’re working on! Not band related!” Kita reasoned, trying to pull up her fainted friend.

“So... a date?” Nijika asked.

“Well...” Ryo thought for a moment. “If you think about it, it kind of is.”

“You’re not helping, Ryo-chan!” Kita shouted, still rejuvenating the pinkhead.

“... ugh, my head. Kita-san, y-you’re supposed to l-lightly sh-shake me... not v-violently...” Hitori breathed out.

“I agree, Kita-chan. Anger issues are not to be dealt lightly.” Nijika pointed out. “Maybe some therapy might help. Ryo, you better take note of this.”

“Don’t worry, I can get her some anger management classes if need be. I care for my partner.” Ryo said with her trademark thumbs up.

“P-partner?!?” Hitori shrieked, making sure she didn’t fall onto the ground.

“Nijika-chan, Ryo-chan, I’m **PERFECTLY** fine.” Kita spoke through gritted teeth.

“Suit yourself. If anything, you’re proving that you both are going on a date.”

“No, I’m not!”

“A-ah, I support y-your marriage with Ryo-san. I-I-I can’t wait to s-see the baby!” Hitori gave a weak thumbs up.

“Marriage?!?” Kita squawked.

“I think you’re thinking ahead too much, Bocchi-chan...” Nijika patted the guitarist, who then started to apologise profusely. “But with that kind of thinking, they’ll need to adopt a child.”

“Marriage is also a serious matter. Let’s start by talking about our budgeting and marriage costs, Kita. I’m sure we will make a great family.” Ryo said.

“That’s it! Ryo-chan, we are leaving!” Kita yelled, grabbing onto Ryo’s arm.

“Wah.” Ryo reacted.

The redhead turned to Hitori.

“Hitori-chan, I’ll see you at school tomorrow?” Kita said, giving her a headpat with her free hand.

“Ehehehe, y-yeah...”

Kita then turned to leave, dragging behind the bassist, who didn’t seem to mind. Ryo was used to being dragged around against her will anyways. Thank Nijika for that.

“H-hey! Where’s my headpat? I worked pretty hard today...” Nijika pouted.

“Hitori-chan’s there for that. Bye everyone! Oh, and thanks for the help PA-san!” Kita waved. PA-san gave a thumbs up, still in her corner.

How does she do that? Stay in one corner for the whole day. She must be like Hitori-chan. Except she’s weirder. Yeah. Definitely weirder.

“Wait. My cat.” Ryo stopped Kita in her tracks. They both waited for Nijicat to walk over to them, for Ryo to scoop her up. “Ok, continue to drag me.”

“Couldn’t you just walk?” Kita asked.

“No, I can’t. My legs don’t work like they used to before.”

Kita groaned as she continued to drag Ryo up the stairs, exiting Starry. She made sure that the bassist bumped each step, bringing out an “Ow.” from her as Kita went up.

“Heh. Typical Ryo.” Nijika shook her head.

“Y-yeah.” Hitori agreed, before headpatting Nijika. “Ah, h-here. Sorry if it isn’t a-as good as the o-others.”

“Mmmm, you’re fine Bocchi-chan. Thanks.” Nijika nuzzled to the touch. “Guess I do act like Nijicat sometimes.”

“Th-that’s not a bad thing. R-really!” Hitori reassured. “I-It’s kinda cute...”

“O-of course it is! I’m cute!”

Oh no, I got Nijika to blush! The-wait. Isn’t that a good thing? Am I levelling up? I can dalliance with people?!?

PA-san watched as the two girls awkwardly stood, both blushing for their own reasons.

“So, you two gonna get cleaning or what?” PA-san asked.

“Ah, r-right. / “Y-y-yes!”

Like their bodies got surcharged with lightning, the two sprang into action. Wiping down tables, tidying chairs, sweeping and mopping the floors.

“Why don’t you help out for once, huh?” Seika nudged PA-san, who came back from taking some pineapple juice from the bar. Someone has to drink it, since nobody orders it.

“Respectfully saying this Manager, I’m not paid enough.”

“You’re just butthurt I didn’t give you a cookie when I gave them to the girls.”

“N-no.” PA-san looked away sheepishly. “Okay, yes. I have a little bit of a sweet tooth.”

“Then go buy some yourself. I can watch these two by myself.” Seika said, sipping on her drink.

“As expected, Manager.” PA-san sighed. “And... you like pineapple juice?”

“Yeah? What’s so weird about it?” Seika took another sip. “Niji, that’s not where the chairs go!”

“Oh, right! My bad Sis!” Nijika yelled back, pulling Hitori to help push the chairs to the other corner.

“You’d think working here for most of her life she’d actually remember.” Seika chuckled and shook her head.

“Hehe, I know right. I don’t know how she still doesn’t remember where they go.” PA-san stretched, an audible crack in her back ringing out as she did. “Ahhh, that hit the spot.”

“Is that the first time you got up?” Seika eyed PA-san. “I pay you to work, not subject yourself to torture.”

“Oh, I’m fine Manager. Not that different from my homelife! That’s why I asked to replace my stool for an office chair.”

“*sigh* At least you’re moving.” Seika took another sip. “Somewhat.”

“Phew! That’s the last of it. Let’s take a breather before we leave, Bocchi-chan?” Nijika wiped her brow.

“Y-yes. I am a b-bit tired myself.” Hitori joined Nijika at the bar.

“Hey, can you girls drink pineapple juice? We have way too much left.” Seika asked.

“Then why’d you buy so many?” Nijika fired back.

“It was a good deal, alright? **50% off** your whole purchase of groceries if you bought a quarter of their stock of pineapple juice! The expiration dates are pretty good too!” Seika rationalised.

“How come I didn’t know about this until just now?”

“I didn’t bring you grocery shopping. You were busy being sick.”

“Ah, right.”

“B-besides Nijika-chan, pineapple juice i-isn’t so bad.” Hitori added, handing her a cup. She too was drinking some pineapple juice. “Kinda I-like lemonade...”

“Well, yeah. Never said it was bad, just,” Nijika took the cup and drank herself. “nobody’s gonna order this stuff. Same thing happened when we had some lemonade for sale. They’re missing out really.”

“You all are weird...” PA-san whispered to herself, staring at the others in disgust.

“Says the weirdo who takes care of a potted plant~” Nijika said, picking up what PA-san whispered.

“Huh? You heard?”

“Sharp ears.” Nijika tugged at her earlobe. “Bocchi-chan can get even quieter than that, so I just got used to it.”

Hitori shrank on her seat and mumbled something incoherent to the two adults.

“Yeah, Sis told me about PA-san’s plant. I bet you a million yen they didn’t hear that.” Nijika stated.

“Yup. / “She said something?”

Hitori’s body size was now microscopic. It was the closest she can get to disappearing entirely.

“I-I don’t have th-that m-much money, Nijika-chan!” Hitori squeaked, her voice shrill.

“I was kidding. Relax. You have to learn not to take everything seriously, Bocchi-chan!” Nijika said.

Hitori popped back to normal, taking a sip on her drink.

“L-like Ryo-san?”

“No. Not like her. Maaaaaybe... like me?” Nijika pointed to herself.

“A-ah, okay...”

Nijika glanced to her side to see the two adults shoot her unimpressed looks.

“What?”

Seika went back to her usual spot, typing away on her laptop. PA-san slumped back on her seat, scrolling through her phone.

I am a good role model! What's with their looks?

Nijika grumbled and crossed her arms. Even her sister doubted her! The betrayal!

...

Well, I can be a little bit violent. Especially with Ryo.

“A-ah, Nijika-chan...” Hitori called out.

“Mmm?” Nijika responded.

“H-haven’t you noticed Ryo-san and Kita-san g-going out together lately?”

“Oh, yeah! I still think they’re dating, but they won’t admit it because of me.” Nijika sipped on her drink. “If I’m being honest, I don’t mind. If it somehow doesn’t get in the way of band activities, then go ahead, y’know?”

“B-b-but I don’t th-think they’re dating.”

“Eh? Really?”

“Y-yeah. Kita-san’s been l-less ‘head-over-heels’ to Ryo-san.” Hitori took a sip. “Ryo-san’s m-more like a crush to Kita-san rather than a-an actual p-potential partner, y-y’know? A-ah, but I d-don’t know much about romance...”

“No, no, you’re fine Bocchi-chan! And, now that you mention it, yeah I agree.”

Bocchi-chan can be really perceptive, right. Sort of like an owl. And Bocchi-chan does have big eyes. Hmm...

“It’s not r-really a bad thing. I’m glad b-both of them a-are getting along-huh?”

Hitori jolted in confusion when Nijika placed her hands to the sides of Hitori’s head. She could only freeze in place and stare as the blonde turned her head left and right.

“Sorry Bocchi-chan! You just remind me of an owl.” Nijika said, keeping her hands on Hitori.

“An o-owl?” Hitori tried to tilt her head. It was weird having someone else hold your head.

“Yeah! You got big, round eyes. And you stare a lot too.” Nijika explained. “D-don’t wither away, please! It’s not something to be ashamed about! Promise!”

Hitori whimpered.

“Really, Bocchi-chan. I mean it.” Nijika sighed. “You see things that even I miss out on. Remember when Kita-chan tried to run away from us again?”

“Yeah? I j-just mentioned she had c-calluses on her fingers.” Hitori reminisced. “Ah, th-that’s what you mean.”

“Mhmm! Believe it or not, you keep us together! Like the, uhh, Bocchi Glue!”

“Bocchi Glue?”

“I’m not good with names.”

“I d-don’t think you ever w-were. Haha...”

“Hey! Cut me some slack! Coming up with names is hard!”

“I-it is.”

A pause as both girls sipped their drinks, with Hitori released from Nijika’s grasp. Hitori shook her head in her new-found freedom.

“S-so, do I really k-keep us together?” Hitori asked.

“Heck yeah you do! You’re our guitarhero! Hehe.” Nijika elbowed Hitori’s side. “You should be more confident in yourself.”

“Th-thanks. B-but the others do s-so much too.”

“Oh, true! That’s what makes us Kessoku Band!” Nijika yelled and pumped her fist. Hitori did the same.

“Not so loud Niji.” Seika rubbed her ears. Nijika quickly apologised, then stopped Hitori from doing anything drastic.

“A-anyways, back to Ryo-san and Kita-san...” Hitori trailed off.

“Mmm, what about them?” Nijika asked.

“Y-you aren’t... jealous or a-anything? N-not that I think you would be! Well, m-maybe. Ah, t-that’s not a bad thing! Wait, it m-might be. But Nijika-chan isn’t b-bad! Not at all! Agh, w-where am I g-going with this...” Hitori rambled and gave up.

Nijika giggled. She was fascinated by how her pinkheaded friend’s thought process worked. Even if it was mostly a sludge that sloshed in her headspace. She had a creative way of visualising people’s

brains, alright? Kita's was a lighthouse and Ryo's was the void of space, for obvious reasons.

"Nah, not really Bocchi-chan. I want our band to be inseparable. Like the, ugh... the band name. As much as I hate saying this, Ryo's band name was pretty smart." Nijika begrudgingly admitted.

"W-what would you have c-chosen?" Hitori asked.

"I... rather not say. Like I said, I'm bad with making names."

"She wanted to go with 'Rocking Girls through the Night'." Seika slipped in, busy typing away. PA-san giggled in the background.

"SIS!"

"Pfft, t-that's really the b-best you can come up w-with? Heh, hehehehe, hahahahahaha!" Hitori laughed.

"Hey, you're not any better, guitarhero!" Nijika shook Hitori, who was still laughing. "Stop laughing!"

"Noooo, staph ith..." Hitori mumbled as Nijika tried to shut her mouth. Her giggles still went through.

Seika watched the two kerfuffle with a smile.

"Manager, you can't adopt Bocchi-chan. She's adorable, yes, but she has a family." PA-san said, seemingly having just read Seika's mind.

"Wha-h-hey!" Seika glared at her employee. "H-how'd you know..."

"You just admitted to it!~" PA-san booped Seika's nose. Said blonde recoiled and buried herself on her laptop. Well, she tried to anyways.

"Sometimes, I hate you." Seika said to her laptop.

"Oh my, that's not good. Having a good relationship with your employees is key to an effective workforce." PA-san pointed out.

“That is why I believe what would help employee morale is a-”

“No.”

“Well, I tried.”

With Hitori’s laughter dying down, the two sat and drank their drinks.

“Ok, fine. I might be a tiny bit jealous. Ryo’s my best friend.” Nijika confessed.

“I k-kinda feel the same with Kita-san...” Hitori also confessed.

“Guess we just have to wait to see what those two have in mind.” Nijika sighed. “Knowing Ryo, it’s probably something stupid.”

“And k-knowing Kita-san, wellllkindadobutyouknowwhatImean, she’ll probably g-go along with it.” Hitori blurted.

“Hah! Yeah.”

Nijika finished her drink, sighing in pineapple delight.

“By the way, your big eyes are cute.”

“What?”

“What?”

What does Ryo and Kita have planned? Tune in next time to find out in part two of Chapter 7!

I know I said multi-part chapters are cringe, but I kinda wrote a lot of dialogue for Bocchi and Nijika. Way more than I thought I would. I also didn't think I would write Seika and PA-san talking too. They were supposed to be BG characters, but whatever. Writing both pairs was fun.

Bocchi comfy around Nijika fr fr.

The cat is back!

Part two will come out when it comes out.

(ps: Recently, I did see a chapter of a fic with Ryo and a cat, you guys probably know which one that is. We need MORE. Plus, Ryo and cats are a good pairing.)

Chapter 7 (part 2)

Chapter 11: Chapter 7 (part 2)

Ryo, Kita and Hitori pass the time. Nijika meets her feline counterpart. And a performance.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“You ready Kita?”

“Mhmm!”

Ryo gestured Kita to get in her car. Their plan was simple and foolproof, the latter decided by the bassist herself (Kita shook her head upon hearing Ryo say that). Ryo would pull up just behind Shuka High, out of view from the rest of the students, near the time of dismissal for the guitarists. Kita would then have to excuse herself to Hitori, before sneaking out through the back to join Ryo in going to Starry.

‘Sorry, Hitori-chan! I have an emergency back at home! Please, tell the others I can’t be there for work and practice today! I’m sure they’ll understand.’ Kita pleaded with Hitori.

‘A-ah, okay... AH, hope everything’s o-ok back at h-home! R-r-remember, the b-band’s got your back in everything! Yeah...’ Hitori replied.

It took almost all of Kita’s being to not spill the beans to Hitori. She was just too sweet and caring! Poor Kita’s heart.

“You sure you’re alright Kita?” Ryo asked, eyeing the redhead clutching her heart. “Hope the dash here wasn’t too much.”

“Nope, Ryo-chan, I’m good.” Kita croaked. “It’s just... aghh! Hitori-chan was sooooo sweet! I feel awful lying to her!”

“It’ll be worth it, trust me.”

“But she gave me the ‘puppy eyes’! How can I just leave her there!” Kita grabbed Ryo’s shoulders and began lightly shaking.

“You already did.”

“Aghh! Don’t remind me!” Kita screeched, before cradling up and hugging her knees. Ryo was slightly impressed that she could do that on a car seat. A car seat in someone else’s car no less.

“Are your friends always this expressive Ryo?” Ryo’s mom asked from the driver’s seat. Her dad had to attend to something in the hospital, so it was only her mom to help Ryo out. They actually listened to her to not drop everything at work just for this. Character development.

“No. It’s just Kita that’s loud.” Ryo stated.

“I’m right here, you know.” Kita mumbled, then perked up to greet Ryo’s mom. “Ah, sorry for my indecent behaviour, ma’am Yamada!”

“Aww, you’re fine Kita-san. If I’m being honest, it’s a little bit adorable.” Ryo’s mom said, making the redhead’s face match her hair. “You chose your girlfriend well, Ryo.”

“We’re not dating!” / “We’re dating?”

Both Kita and Ryo said, with Kita turning her head to the bassist to say, “Really?”

“I’m open to it.” Ryo shrugged.

“Thank goodness I got over crushing on you.” Kita grumbled.

“Soooo, is all this related to what Ryo here’s been practising over the week?” Ryo’s mom questioned.

“Yup Mom.”

“You’ve been practising at home?” Kita asked.

“Lately, yeah.”

“Oh ho, and she even brought home her cute cat for practice! I’m more surprised that our Ryo is taking care of a cat!”

“Yes ma’am! She takes good care of Nijicat!” Kita exclaimed, her aura filling the tiny car space. Ryo opted to look out the window, finding that they were near.

“Girls, we’re close. You remember to pack the clothes Ryo?”

“Mhmm.”

“Great! Hurry now, I can’t stay here too long~” Ryo’s mom said, stopping in an alley near Starry.

“Thank you so much for the ride, ma’am Yamada!” Kita thanked their driver. “Sorry to have pulled you out of your work for this!”

“Please, Kita-san, don’t be. Anything to get out of the office once in a while, and especially if it’s for a special project of Ryo.”

“Moooooom...” Ryo groaned as she stepped out of the car. Kita giggled.

Ryo-chan’s pretty cute around her mother.

“Hmm, I don’t see Nijicat by Starry. Perhaps it’s already inside?” Kita squinted her eyes.

“Bummer. Guess we’ll just have to wait for it to come before we can do our thingy.” Ryo walked to the trunk. “Lemme just check if we

have-”

Ryo immediately closed the trunk, eliciting a confused look on Kita.

“What’s the matter, dear? Did I forget to bring anything?” Ryo’s mom asked.

“Something wrong Ryo-chan? You said you made sure everything’s there before you left for school.” Kita added.

“Call me crazy, but I think Bocchi’s in our trunk.” Ryo said, voice strangely devoid of bewilderment.

“What?!”

Kita rushed to get the trunk open, surprised to see the pink guitarist hugging her guitar case, lying next to their stuff.

“H-hi guys.” Hitori awkwardly waved.

“I don’t mind the company, but why follow me today out of all days?” Nijika asked.

“Meeoow!”

“Right, I’m talking to a cat.” Nijika pulled out a mask to put on.

Nijika’s suspicions on Ryo and Kita’s outings have resulted in her arriving at Starry much earlier. She knew she couldn’t beat Ryo’s car (for obvious reasons), so she decided to slip out of her last class early. She would have to deal with the consequences later, but her curiosity was stronger than her diligence. Strangely, Ryo paid no mind to her disappearing for the last hour, which made the blonde even more determined to find out what they’re plotting.

Looking back at it, Ryo was probably too spaced out to notice her leave. It was Math class. Ryo hated Math.

Upon arrival at Starry, her sister was surprised to see her. A quick explanation for her early-bird behaviour and a brief scolding from Seika about not missing out on school (which backfired greatly when the younger sister mentioned all the times the older sister skipped classes for her band), Seika handed her a grocery trolley bag.

'While you're early, go buy our monthly grocery.' Seika asked.

'By myself? You must be joking.' Nijika said.

'Does it sound like I'm joking?'

'I dunno. Hard to tell with you. You also make horrible jokes.'

'Just go.'

And so she was out, dragging the trolley bag to the usual grocery store they go to. She was a bit bummed that her sister wouldn't be with her. It was a time for the both to spend time with each other, alone together. A bit silly to think about, but Nijika savours every time she gets with her only family.

Oh yeah, and Nijicat tagged along. She didn't notice the cat until she arrived at the grocery store.

"I'm sorry Nijicat, but cats aren't allowed in here." Nijika sadly said.
"So, uhh... sit? Here?"

The cat tilted its head in confusion, yet sat by the entrance.

"Good kitty. I'll try to be fast!"

With the cat stationed by the entrance (Nijika hoped - she couldn't tell if the cat sat in response or in confusion), Nijika dashed into the grocery store. Their list of groceries wasn't relatively long, but the majority of it was for stocking up at Starry. Jugs of drinks, containers of sweeteners and powders, as well as bundles of fruits had to be bought. When Nijika was finally at the counter, she could barely fit all

of the food and drinks into the bag. But with her patented tenacity and sheer will, they fitted snugly inside.

Thank goodness Sis agreed to get the heavy duty trolley...

When she went back out, lugging the newfound heaviness, she was glad to find the feline by the entrance.

"Nice Nijicat! Your owner will be proud to hear about this!" Nijika bent down to pet. "A little too proud, if I'm being honest."

"Meow!"

"Glad you like the pets. Now, c'mon! I still need to catch Ryo in the act... of whatever they have planned." Nijika beckoned.

Though the grocery store wasn't far, Nijika may have underestimated the weight of the trolley. Normally, having Seika's help would make the venture back much smoother; but since she wasn't here, Nijika had no choice but to take a rest at a nearby bench.

"Phew! This thing's heavier than I thought, huh? Don't mind if we take a little break before continuing?" Nijika asked.

"Mew!"

"Why am I talking to a cat..."

Nijika wiped her brow and watched Nijicat hop onto the bench. The cat sat as Nijika caught her breath, resting her poor arms from pulling all that weight. She liked to believe that out of the rest of the band members, she was the strongest - have you seen her gut punches? But, even someone with her strength needed rest.

With nothing better to do, she began to speak her mind.

"So, you kinda came into our lives out of nowhere, hmm?" Nijika spoke, getting the attention of the feline. "Well, especially Ryo's.

She's been a lot more happy now that she takes care of you, y'know that?"

Nijika pulled out a lemonade she bought out of the trolley to drink.

"Ahhh~" Nijika sighed. "My favourite."

"Meow!"

"No, Nijicat. Cats don't drink lemonade."

The cat lowered in disappointment. Somehow, this made Nijika feel bad for the kitty, so she ruffled its head. When the cat meowed in bliss, she continued to pet and speak.

"You've also been a blessing to us. I still remember that day when I opened up to Ryo about Mom. You were a real lifesaver! And, I'm sure you helped plenty with the others."

Nijika took another sip.

"But, you also got me sick. And my sister too." Nijika said, fastening her mask a little better. "*sigh* I'm not blaming you for that. Err, I kind of am. Whatever! Just need your owner to help train you not to sneak into our house or to get the jump on Sis."

Nijicat purred at the touch of Nijika's hands.

"Though - and I'm not saying this like we're competing - I think I'm cuter. Like, objectively speaking. Without any bias. If there was a cute meter between us two, I'd score higher. Factually correct. Sorry Nijicat, but I got you beat!"

"Meow!"

"Ugh... why am I comparing myself to a cat?" Nijika spoke into her free hand. "It's just a-whatever. I'm glad you're part of Kessoku Band. Unofficially. Oh, you could be our mascot! When we make it big! Whaddayasay?"

“Meow.”

“Right. Cat.”

Nijika got up to stretch, stashing her lemonade back into the trolley. She'd finish it later.

“Though, I have to say. Ryo does a great job making sure you look amazing! And cute.” Nijika glanced at the cat, who shook itself as if it was flaunting its looks. “Don't ever tell Ryo I said that. Or else I'd never stop hearing about that until the day I die.”

“Mrrow!”

“Th-thanks? Well, we should get going. Can't keep them waiting on Nijika Ijichi!” Nijika pumped her fist, now rejuvenated and ready to complete her task.

Maybe I could convince Sis to get us a pet. It's kinda nice having Nijicat around.

She got up and continued to drag the trolley to Starry, with Nijicat following next to her.

After a rigorous explanation from Ryo and Kita to Ryo's mother that Hitori's shapeshifting abilities were normal for the pinkhead, agreeing with Ryo's mother that it made no sense how she was still physically well after everything, and reassuring her that they were both well-versed in taking care of their guitarist, Ryo's mother left them. Kita had to carry Hitori's and her own guitars, as Ryo held a mostly solid Hitori down into Starry. She melted from the stares she got from Ryo's mom and liquified even more when she started to shout out of concern for the pinkhead.

Seika didn't even bat an eye as Ryo and Kita entered into the live house, even with the almost lifeless pinkhead in the bassist's arms.

“Another Bocchi Time?” Seika asked, still typing away on her laptop.

“Mhmm.” Ryo hummed.

“We found her in the trunk of Ryo-chan’s car! She probably followed us into the car.” Kita added, hesitantly laying her hand on Hitori’s... something. She wasn’t really sure what her hand was on.

Seika paused in her typing, before continuing.

“I should be more surprised, huh. But, I’m not.” Seika said, turning to the girls. “You two can take care of her, yeah?”

“Yup.” / “Of course, Manager!”

“Great. And, uhh, Bocchi-chan?” Seika waved her hand in front of Hitori’s face. At least, what she thought was her face. “Can she... hear me?”

Both girls shrugged.

“A-anyways, if you can hear me: it’s not your fault. They’ll explain everything once you’re... ehh... back together?”

The pink blob in Ryo’s arms seemed to move, giving Seika some reassurance that she heard.

“Well, I’ll leave you both to Bocchi-chan.” Seika entrusted, going back to her work on her laptop.

Both girls sat by a nearby table, Kita unloading their stuff on the table and Ryo slowly laying Hitori on a seat. They both sat by her and reassured her to get back together, with Kita mostly doing the work. Eventually, with enough encouragement, Hitori was back to normal.

“... th-thanks guys...” Hitori whispered. “S-s-sorry. Her g-gaze was really sc-scary...”

“Eh, my mom’s like that. But she actually is super sweet.” Ryo said.

Diabetically sweet, really. Might need to visit them to check if I have diabetes.

“Are you alright, Hitori-chan?” Kita asked, still rubbing little circles on the girl’s back. “You were able to breathe in there?”

Hitori nodded.

“Good. Guess it isn't too different to your closet. You really can fit in anywhere, huh?”

“Yeah. That’s pretty rock.” Ryo gave a thumbs up.

“Ryo-chan, you can’t say that to anything.”

“I just did.”

“Anyways,” Kita said after bonking Ryo on the head, “why were you in the trunk?”

“A-ah, right...” Hitori fiddled with her thumbs and zoned in on the ground. Who knew Starry’s floor was so shiny?

I can almost see my reflection. Oooh. Manager really makes sure we keep these floors clean. I wonder what kind of mop liquid she uses. Maybe a combination of soaps? Perhaps, dishwasher liquids? Perfume? Would it be weird if I took a sniff of the floor? I bet it smells-

“Hitori-chan! Come back to us!” Kita shook the pinkhead, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“AH! S-s-sorry again!” Hitori slightly bowed to Kita.

“Bocchi. Stop stalling.” Ryo said flatly.

“I’m n-not...” Hitori whimpered.

“Ryo-chan, be patient. Let her speak when she’s ready.” Kita lightly scolded Ryo.

“I do the same when I don’t wanna say something.”

“Really? So, it’s like an introvert thing?”

“Dunno. Maybe.”

“I th-think Ryo-san is saying t-that it’s easy for u-us to get lost i-in our thoughts, a-and that sometimes we t-take advantage of t-that in ce-certain conversations we d-don’t want to be in...” Hitori half-explained, half-mumbled.

“Yeah, what she said.” Ryo patted Hitori’s head. “Well put-together Bocchi.”

“Eheheheheh, thanks...”

“You have a way with words, you know that Hitori-chan?” Kita added to the praises.

“Ehehehehe, aww... noooo... hehehehee...”

“We need Bocchi to be solid, Kita.”

“I’m sorry! Couldn’t help it!”

After stabilising the pinkhead and making sure she’s solid (Hitori screamed when Ryo poked her side to be sure), the duo asked her once again.

“So, what were you doing in the trunk Hitori-chan?” Kita asked.

“W-well...” Hitori took a deep breath, before rambling. “You know when we met in the hallway, Kita-san? Yeah, when you told me you had an emergency to attend to? I could tell you were lying. Ah, not saying that you lie often! Actually, you’re one of the most honest members in the band! Nevermind that! So, I kinda knew you were

lying, so I followed you to the back of the school and saw you get into a car. And, I thought that you were being kidnapped or something! Well, you could probably put up quite a fight, Kita-san. But, the more help the better, right? Ah, but I don't think I can fight anyone. I can't even fight my little sister. Anyways, yeah. So, the trunk wasn't locked and I hopped in. Quite a tight fit, even for me, but I managed to fit even with my guitar. The car started to move, and I couldn't really back out even if I wanted to, so I rode along with you guys. I waited until Ryo found me there..."

Hitori was now out of breath from her explanation. She shakily had her arm on Kita's shoulder, the only thing keeping her not on the floor face-first.

"Wow. Impressive." Ryo gave a small applause.

"Ryo-chan! Show some tact!" Kita slapped Ryo's shoulder.

"Ow."

"That's... quite the story, Hitori-chan. Sorry for lying to you earlier." Kita apologised.

"I-it's ok Kita-san! It was a l-little obvious you were tr-trying to hide something. Besides, y-you could've just texted the o-others about i-it." Hitori said.

"Aww, you're making me feel worse!" Kita wailed, hugging Hitori. "I'm sorry Hitori-chan! It hurt me more to lie to you!"

"... urk... tight!" Hitori coughed out, reaching her arm towards Ryo. "Ryo-san... h-help..."

"Not until you feel better, Bocchi." Ryo patted Hitori's head.

"Ack! I... don't feel... much b-better..."

Another gauntlet to add into the myriad of trials. When will my suffering end? When will I atone for what I have done? When will

Kita-san stop hugging me?

“Mmmmmm! There!” Kita loosened her hug. “Feel any better?”

“Kita? You might’ve crushed her lungs.” Ryo pointed at the deflating pink balloon.

Kita took a good look at Hitori, who was currently fighting her urge to sink into the floor.

“Oh, s-sorry again.” Kita let Hitori lean on her, still recovering from all that has happened to her. Shapeshifting this often is tiring, even for Hitori.

She also nearly got her life squeezed out of her too.

“Mmmmmm...” Hitori mumbled into Kita’s shoulder.

“At least she’s still responsive. You could’ve put her into a near-death state with that hug.” Ryo commented, shaking her head. She looked back at Kita to see her glaring daggers at her. “What?”

“Mmmph mm mmphmm mhmm mmm.” Hitori hummed.

“What?” Both Kita and Ryo said, prompting Hitori to lift her head to speak. She was still leaning on Kita, who began to lightly blush at the realisation of Hitori’s proximity.

“S-so, what do y-you both have planned?” Hitori weakly asked.

Kita and Ryo exchanged looks, with Ryo shaking her head.

“I’m... sorry Hitori-chan. You’re going to have to wait until later. Trust me, you’ll be surprised with what we’ve been cooking!” Kita said.

“O-oh, ok. Heheheh, I’m k-kinda excited n-now. Hehehe...” Hitori giggled. Kita could feel the erratic vibrations from the pinkhead.

“Can you stand?”

“Hehehe-ah! I don’t th-think so. S-sorry.”

“Then you can rest on me until Nijika comes back!”

Ryo observed the two guitarists practically snuggle in their own company.

*“No wonder you left me. You’re seeing Bocchi now. *sniff sniff*”*

... is what Ryo would say. But, knowing full well that Hitori would seep through the floor and never return, she refrained herself from blurting that out. Plus, she was certain that Kita would have her head.

One point to the Yamada. Ayooo, who’s got self-control? I do! Oh yeah! Whooooooooo!

Didn’t stop Ryo from celebrating in her head.

“Oh, good. Bocchi-chan’s back.” Seika walked by. “Nijika’s probably not going to be here for a while, so do you guys... wait, actually. Ryo, mind helping in setting up the stage for your thingy?”

“Mmm.” Ryo got up to help.

“I’m curious Manager, what did you send Nijika to do for her to take this long?” Kita asked.

“Y-yeah, Manager. She’s b-been gone for a w-while now...” Hitori added.

“Hm? Oh, I got her to buy our monthly groceries.” Seika said.

“Heh. Nijika’s gonna be growing grey hair by the time she gets here.” Ryo chuckled.

“Hah... hah... I’m... here!” Nijika heaved. “Y-yay...”

“Mreow!”

“Oh, you’re here. Good. Place the trolley by the bar, I’ll unpack everything later.” Seika said, waving off her sister as she typed on her laptop. Hearing the meow of Nijicat, Seika put on a double mask.

“Ok Sis...”

At least it isn’t that awful WWII mask. And some appreciation for my efforts would be nice...

“A ‘thank you Nijika’ would be... *huff*... be nice. Hah...” Nijika grumbled, voice breathy from all the lugging.

“Thank you, Niji.” Seika flashed Nijika a genuine smile, before losing it as she went back to her laptop.

“U-uhh, y-yeah.” Nijika stuttered, flabbergasted that her sister thanked her. “We... haah... we have a live s-soon? Why is the stage like t-that?”

Nijika pointed to the Starry stage. Where mic stands, cables and speakers used to be, now were gone, leaving the stage strangely empty. Just barely peeking through the curtains was part of a wooden platform that covered the middle of the stage. They even managed to bring out the old smoke machine for this, already coating the stage in thick fog.

“Oh, Ryo-san and Kita-san have something prepared for you and Bocchi-chan!” PA-san spoke from her corner. Nijika waddled awkwardly to her.

“Knew it! I-is it something... stupid?”

“Oh no! You’ll be surprised with what they have in store! Especially with me behind the booth!”

“Huh, so a performance. Cool. Woulda been nice t-to let... haah... let the whole band in it, but whatever.”

“I dunno.” PA-san giggled. “Bocchi-chan would definitely not like doing it and you might find it a bit... absurd.”

“Whuh?”

“Thanks for the help with Manager’s groceries by the way!” PA-san tried to headpat the blonde, but ended up covering half of her face with her long sleeves. “Uhh, you get the sentiment. Go meet up with the others before they start!”

“O-okay.”

Nijika shambled over to where Kita and Hitori were. Hitori was still leaning on Kita, taking a small nap. Nijika could see some fancy clothing besides the girls, as well as shrunken clothes.

Small enough to fit a cat. Wait.

“Oh, Nijika-chan! You’re here!” Kita exclaimed. “C’mon Hitori-chan, I gotta get ready with Ryo-chan!”

“Mmmmmm...” Hitori refused, snuggling closer to Kita.

“Bocchi-chan? Is she alright?” Nijika asked. “She’s usually not t-that snugly.”

“Yeah, she is. Went through a lot recently, she’s just recharging her batteries. I could ask the same thing to you!”

“Ah. Groceries.”

“We know! Sorry Nijika-chan, we wanted to surprise both you and Hitori-chan with our performance!” Kita beamed.

“Yeah, I heard from PA-san. It’s nothing stupid, no?”

“Of course not! Then I wouldn’t agree to it!”

“Fair. I can take over as Bocchi-chan’s pillow. Need a rest myself...”
Nijika stretched, before collapsing on a nearby seat by the table.

“Oh, yes please! I still need to get ready!” Kita gently laid Hitori on Nijika, grabbing the clothes as she dashed to the backroom.

“Mmmm... lemons...” Hitori snuggled into her new pillow.

“Look at us both. Bunch of tired goofballs.” Nijika said, laying her head on Hitori’s.

“Heh... goofballs... lemons...”

“Bocchi-chan. Stop nibbling my hair. I’m not a lemon.”

“A-ah! Sorry! Sorry!” Hitori apologised, now a little bit more awake.

“So, what do you think they have planned?”

“I don’t know.” Hitori yawned. “But it’s definitely something w-with Nijicat.”

“Yeah! The small clothes with the little boots?”

“Mmm.”

“Well, from the looks of things, they’ve been planning this for a while. Let’s enjoy the show?”

“Yeah.”

The two girls lay there as an assortment of sounds echoed from the backroom. Something that sounded like clacking, hushed whispers and faint meowing? Both of their suspicions were correct! Nijicat was part of their performance. But, how?

If it’s stand-up comedy, I will die. Especially with Ryo leading the whole thing.

From the back, Seika could be seen shaking her head. She's known about their little project for a while, yet as the day of the performance came closer, she's been having second thoughts. How could two highschoolers pull off something that takes much skill in a short amount of time? Sure, from the stories Nijika's shared about Ryo, that girl can learn anything if she puts her mind to it. But Kita? Not to her offence, but the redhead's barely mastered the guitar, what more this?

PA-san was in anticipation, waiting for her cue. Though a little absurd, she was totally on board with their project. Something fun and different, where the girls get a time to not think about the band - even if just for a moment. She was also excited about the actual performance; only Seika has watched the duo practice on Kessoku Band's off days. Her involvement was purely preparing the stage and lights for their performance, so she made sure they were the best they've ever looked.

A ping from her phone rings out and PA-san pulls it out. A text from Ryo.

"just read the script and we'll start after. don't forget to make us look amazing."

Below it was the script Ryo typed for PA-san to read out loud.

I don't think she accounted for the fact that there isn't a mic in my booth. Typical Ryo-san...

With an audible groan, PA-san got up from her comfy corner and shuffled awkwardly to the storage room to get a mic. The audience of three (the sisters and Hitori) watched as PA-san walked back to her booth, mic in hand, and fumbled to plug it into her sound system.

"Hello? You guys hear me?" PA-san asked, poking the mic a few times for good measure.

“Loud and clear!” Nijika yelled from her table, with Hitori giving a thumbs up.

“Alright,” PA-san cleared her throat, before speaking with a somewhat decent announcer voice, “Ladies and... well, just ladies! Today, we have a special performance from none other than the amazing, illustrious, outstanding, cool... best cat owner in the world- I’ll, uhh, skip most of this. It’s really long, I’m sorry Ryo-san.”

Nijika just shook her head.

Typical Ryo.

Another ping rang from PA-san’s phone.

“read the whole thing”

Then another.

“plz. i beg of u.”

Sighing away from the mic, she continued with the script.

“None other than Ryo Yamada! And her partner, Ikuyo Kita!”

“That’s Kita Kita, thank you!” a familiar voice shouted from behind the curtains.

Nijika shook her head again.

Typical Kita-chan.

“Sorry, I meant Kita Kita! To accompany such a special performance with such esteemed performers, a special guest will be appearing alongside the duo, who is none other than Nijicat! I wonder what they have in store for us today? Well, without further ado, please welcome our performers onstage!”

Nijika and Hitori gave their applause, with Seika sliding towards PA-san's side.

"Your announcer voice could use some work." Seika criticised.

"Like you're one to talk." PA-san fired back, prepping the lights for the performance.

Pushing the button to reveal the stage, the audience found three silhouettes onstage. Though the smoke made it hard to make out who was who, the figures of Ryo and Kita are posed, almost like statues. The 'cat-like' figure was kind of waddling around the wooden board they were on, minding its own business.

Flicking on the lights and illuminating the stage showed their outfits. Ryo was wearing something similar to her butler outfit back in the school festival, except she was also adorning a top hat that she had tipped over her face a little. Kita was wearing some of her winter clothing: a square patterned trench coat paired with black stockings. Surprisingly, Nijicat too was clothed in similar attire, wearing a grey jumper with a little bowtie around its neck. All of them were wearing plain black shoes. At least, that's what Nijika and Hitori thought until Ryo unfroze.

click *clack*

The pair were caught off guard.

Ooh, tap dancing shoes! This should be fun.

Really? Tap dancing? And, Ryo out of all people?

Ryo glanced at PA-san in her corner and nodded. PA-san gave a thumbs up and played their accompanying track.

What played was unfamiliar to the pair, perhaps an old English song by the sound of things. Definitely something Ryo picked out. Ryo began to tap away, smooth in execution and never staying to one

singular beat yet keeping in rhythm with the song's mellow tempo. She sometimes would toss her hat, catching it ever so gracefully while she glided across the wooden floorboard. Meanwhile, Kita sang.

"Fly me to the moon, let me play among the stars..."

A little bit lower than she usually does and sometimes stumbling over some hard to pronounce words, but nevertheless serene. She also joined in with Ryo during the instrumental; as the trumpets blared, she mimicked Ryo's movements - though, not as smooth as the bassist.

Nijicat was still kind of standing there, unsure why it was even there in the first place. But, from time to time, it would move and make clacking sounds with its boots. Strangely, they synced with the song too...

The song ended as Kita twirled into Ryo's arms, posing with flair as she sang the last line of the song. She hung from Ryo's arm, while Ryo stretched her other arm. They stood there for a moment, before Ryo made quiet noises towards Nijicat, who walked over to curl up by Ryo's shoe.

Eh, close enough.

Small applause came from the audience, except Seika who shook her head, and yet had a small smile on her face.

"I can't believe you guys actually pulled it off." Seika muttered, shocked that the whole thing went off without a hitch.

"Way to go guys! That was amazing!" PA-san whistled. She would clap, but her big sleeves got in the way.

"Woah. That was really cool!" Hitori applauded. While she wasn't into dancing (for obvious reasons), she couldn't deny that what she just saw was really, really cool.

“Bocchi-chan, pinch me please.” Nijika said.

“W-what?” Hitori asked. When Nijika didn’t answer, she hesitantly poked her side. She was ready to apologise if she was too strong when Nijika spoke.

“Thanks Bocchi-chan. Just had to be sure, because... that was awesome!”

The performers bowed, heading off the stage to meet with Nijika and Hitori.

“Haah... so, how were we?” Kita asked, huffing a little.

“You two were great! More than great! How’d you guys do that?” Nijika exclaimed, waving her arms around.

“Eh, just practice. Good thing my family had spare tap dancing shoes.” Ryo said.

“S-so this was your p-project?” Hitori slipped in.

“Yup Hitori-chan! Took us a whole two weeks of practising everyday! I’d say it was worth it.” Kita beamed, somehow glowing despite being tired.

“Mhm. And it was all my idea.” Ryo gloated.

“As much as I don’t want to say it, yeah it was Ryo-chan’s idea.” Kita deadpanned, before giggling, “Pfft, you should’ve seen her before we danced. She was a nervous wreck!”

“Hey, that’s slander.” Ryo poked Kita’s shoulder.

“It isn’t if it’s true~” Nijika sang. “But really, that was a treat to watch. Thank you both. The smoke was a bit much.”

“Oh, that was Manager’s idea!” Kita pointed out.

Nijika leaned to see Seika talking with PA-san.

“Really Sis? The smoke machine?” Nijika shouted.

Seika glanced at her sister, before shouting back, “What? It makes all performances look cool.”

“Ugh, my sister. Anyways, any chance you could teach us?”

“Well, we did plan this as a one-off thing, but if it doesn’t get in the way of band practice, then sure!” Kita answered.

“Once you get the hang of it, it’s pretty fun.” Ryo confirmed. “Hmm, I don’t know if Bocchi will like it. Physically demanding and potentially embarrassing.”

Hitori shivered down her spine.

Am I that easy to read? An open book?

“W-w-well, if y-you all a-are down for i-it, then I g-guess I could join t-too...” Hitori spoke to the floor.

“You don’t have to if you don’t wanna, Bocchi-chan.” Nijika reassured. “Think of it as something just for fun!”

“A-ah, I d-do. I do want to learn! J-just have to f-fight the urge n-not to, w-well y’know...”

“Don’t worry Bocchi. Kita was horrible when we first started.” Ryo said.

“Hey! You were terrible too!” Kita shouted.

“Terribly cool, Kita. That’s the difference.”

“Ooh, think of how we can incorporate this into our band! Kind of a whiplash for sure, but it’ll make us unique!” Nijika sparkled from the

idea. "I can picture it: 'the first tap dancing highschool girls rock band in Japan'."

"That does sound intriguing. But first, we gotta get good." Ryo stated, adding, "With our band too."

"Of course!" / "Copy, Ryo-chan!" / "Y-yeah."

"O-oh yeah, how'd y-you get the i-idea for tap dancing?" Hitori asked.

"Yeah, I was wondering the same myself. Ryo-chan, you never told me." Kita joined in.

"Well..."

Ryo was mindlessly scrolling through her phone. She really should be finishing up with her last assignment for tomorrow, but her procrastination said otherwise. Not finding anything intriguing, she came across a video of a cat wearing a tight suit costume. The cat had small boots that made clacking sounds as it walked.

"Heh, that's pretty cute. I bet I could do that with Nijicat."

"I got inspired? Tap dancing is a really cool form of dance, and I always wanted to get into-"

"You saw a cute video on your phone, didn't you?" Nijika cut her off.

"I... yeah." Ryo deflated.

"At least you're being honest. Somewhat honest. What you both pulled off was amazing though. Especially for you." Nijika spoke, bumping Ryo's shoulder with her fist.

"And what's that supposed to mean? Like you could do that." Ryo gestured to the stage.

“I bet I could. Waaaaay better than you two.” Nijika scoffed.

“I d-don’t know about that, Nijika-chan. Ryo-san was p-pretty good.” Hitori said.

“As her dancing partner, I agree with Hitori-chan!” Kita added.
“Though, you’re definitely better than Nijicat.”

“Hey now, that’s not fair to Nijika.” Ryo quipped.

“Hey!” Nijika bonked Ryo on the head as everyone laughed.

“Oi! You girls gonna clean up yet? Customers come in any second now.” Seika hollered.

“We will, Sis!” Nijika responded. “You heard the boss, let’s get this place cleaned up! We can talk about when we can tap dance another time.”

“Eh? But I don’t wanna work. I’m tired.” Ryo groaned.

“A-and I’m Bocchi. Hehehehehe, ehehehehe...” Hitori joked.

Silence.

“N-not funny?”

“Not funny.” / “Yeah, sorry Hitori-chan.” / “Nope.”

The group had to clean up the floor too.

Tap dancing. Yeah! I have no idea how tap dancing works. This chapters was really 'what if Ryo and Kita do something really goofy, like tap dancing?'. Not sure, but this part might be the second longest I've written? Kinda hard to have consistent chapter length when you're cooking hard.

Keeping track of suffixes when characters address each other is tiring. Just pretend that saying ma'am is normal.

Nijicat dance. Nijicat dance.

Proofreading sucks.

Honestly, I did not expect this to continue until now. Thanks to all of the comments, I read all of them and appreciate the warm words. As long as funny 'what ifs' keep coming to me, I'll keep writing more here. Of course, sprinkled with actual serious scenes. In spirit with the actual anime, y'know?

Next chapter whenever! I might have a Chapter 7: Aftermath since I have in mind of a scene that happens right after this. Maybe. Idk.

Chapter 7: Aftermath

Chapter 12: Chapter 7: Aftermath

The band gets to work. But, what if there wasn't any work?

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Ryo sighed as she slumped further into her chair, meshing together with the metallic object. While her whole body protested to not work after her and Kita's stellar performance, she also liked getting paid. Her mouth especially didn't like having to work, constantly yapping and groaning until Nijika shut her up. She was grateful that today seemed to be another dry day, even more so when Seika stationed her as reception. She didn't have to mop any floors, or clean any tables, or do anything physically demanding. She just had to sit there and occasionally talk with an incoming customer. Makes sense why reception was her favourite job.

Though, it was a little strange how every time she was tasked with reception, there'd be barely any customers. Oh well, better take it and ask questions later. Or never.

Kita and Nijika were currently at the bar, the former wanting to show off how much she's memorised the layout of her workplace. The blonde was impressed, considering even she herself didn't remember half the stuff Kita pointed out - the usual customers in Starry don't really go for other drinks. Hitori was tasked with cleaning and setting up the tables, which though her whole body protested to go through "physical labour" (Nijika had to correct her again), she couldn't say no to Seika. Old habits die hard.

Ryo was enjoying some Ryo Yamada time, thinking hard to nobody but herself.

It really doesn't roll off the tongue. 'Ryo Yamada time', yeah I think it gets worse the more I think about it. Maybe just... 'Ryo time'? Or, 'Yamada time'? 'Ryo period'? 'State of Yamada'?

Giving up on finding a more suitable name to her alone time, her mind started to wander.

She wondered why Manager was so concerned with getting the place cleaned up for customers. It felt like most of their days were slow. Sure, it may feel that way due to the bassist's inability to help out in an amount that ranges from three times on a good day to none on a typical day, but with the lack of having to do something, she really wondered. Maybe because Starry was her pride and joy, she wants it spick and span, to a tee. Kind of like how a pirate captain wants to keep their ship clean, even if it mostly just floats around. Actually, pirate ships must be horrible and disgusting - nevermind. Bad comparison.

A car owner who cleans their car, but doesn't actually use it? Yeah, that's better.

Still doesn't answer the question of why she wants Starry so clean and tidy. It just... so... much... work. Ugh, just thinking about it makes Ryo's head spin.

Maybe I'm the problem.

A realisation? A revelation?

...

Eh, nah. I'm just too cool for work.

That's gone down the dumpster.

She thought of what the other two girls would look like tap dancing. Hitori would probably look absolutely dreadful, both in her looks and her attitude. The well-known recluse being shoved into the forefront

and forced to dance wasn't the best image to see. Perhaps she was thinking a little overkill, but regardless Hitori would be a fish out of sea. Not that she wasn't attractive, in fact she was the opposite under the right circumstances. Kita was right about that, for sure. Though, if she managed to pull off the dancing, then Ryo would reconsider. Likely, considering Hitori's known for pushing her limits and then melting onto the floor once those limits have been surpassed. Oh well, Ryo will just have to see at their first ever band tap dancing lesson. She was looking forward to that.

Meanwhile, Nijika would fit perfectly. From all of the years she has known the blonde, Ryo always knew she was kind of a goofball. A goofy, yet cheerful person. The way she speaks, the spring in her step when she walks, her joy radiating around her. She's been through the most out of the rest of the band, and still triumphs in happiness. Sure, Kita may be the bright, maybe too bright, one in the band. But, in the end, Nijika will always be the driving force of Kessoku Band, not just as their leader but as their friend.

She also sometimes makes lame jokes so bad, Ryo would often snicker ironically. She probably gets them from her sister.

She'd kill me if I ever told her that. Manager or Nijika, I'd die either way.

Thinking back to how Nijika would look in tap dancing, she'd be perfect. If she really had to find a reason why, maybe it was the style of tap dancing. How a lively, cheerful girl like Nijika would tap dance hard, clicking and clacking all over the place with ease. She also has seen Nijika in a few overalls, which Ryo thinks fit tap dancing. It was goofy enough. A few lessons and she'd probably be a natural. Ryo had to calm down her pride upon thinking about it. She could let Nijika be potentially better than her in this one thing slide.

Besides, I get to see her in a cute outfit. And she'd look pretty cute with those dance moves.

Ryo paused her thinking.

Nijicat still beats her though. Unfair competition, really. Putting Nijika to the chopping block. Poor Nijika.

From Ryo's corner, she could see a flash of pink every so often, scrambling around to fulfil her duty. She sighed again. For some reason, despite all that's happened so far, today was going too slow for Ryo. Excruciatingly slow. It was weird. She liked being alone, she loved it. But, she was starting to miss some company.

Maybe it was from the time she spent with Kita? Probably not, her eyes are nearly blind from the amount of times she's been faceblasted with her aura. Any more time spent with her and she'd have to buy sunglasses. She could use a break from the dazzling diva.

I appreciate us getting along, but yeesh. I should get her a lampshade for her birthday.

Then, Nijika? She can always crash by their place and the blonde will eventually let her stay, but not without her usual spiel of "Don't you have a home to go to? Your parents might be worried sick!", or something along the lines of that.

Honestly, she should be more honest with herself. I can read her like a book. A good book. Like those books with pictures.

Hitori? Weirdly, as similar as they are, they don't spend as much time together. Outside of meeting up to discuss song making and lyric crafting, they don't really hang out.

Maybe I should change that. It'd be a nice change of pace. And that girl is hilarious.

But Hitori wasn't the reason why she was longing for some company. Nor was it any of the other band mates.

Then, it was definitely Nijicat. Her little furball.

Yeah, it's definitely the cat.

She was starting to miss the cat, with said cat deciding to leave after everything. Maybe it needed to snooze after tap dancing. Can't blame it. She would've done the same, were it not for her job.

'ways to swap souls with animals', mental note. Gotta search that up when I get home.

She straightened up, not wanting to slump too much onto the table. She thought again. Her thoughts weren't getting less entertaining (that'd be like if she suddenly hated the whole entertainment industry), nor was she hating being alone. She'd basically be killing herself if either happened, metaphorically of course. So, why couldn't she just get lost in her thoughts and be content again? Think about everything and nothing at the same time, before she gets her break or the day ends? Create a black hole of thoughts in her head?

"A-ah, Ryo-san. H-hi." Hitori appeared, shyly waving at the bassist. It took a second for Ryo to realise that Hitori was in front of her, changing her position to recline on the chair, before shooting her own wave.

"Yo, Bocchi. You on your break?" Ryo asked. Her coolness knows no bounds.

"M-mhmm. Manager s-said that I can hang out h-here until i-it ends, a-and I d-didn't want to but in Nijika-chan and Kita-san..." Hitori pointed to the two, who were now conversing, seeing as there weren't any customers yet.

"Yeah, I wouldn't either. I can handle one of them, but both? Nuh-uh." Ryo said. Social battery was precious to both of the introverts.

"I g-get you. Y-you don't mind me s-sitting here? I am p-pretty tired."

"Nah, go ahead. Why would I ever mind?"

“A-ah-ehh-ummmm... heuhauh...” Hitori garbled as she crash landed on the chair next to Ryo. The blue head had to make sure she didn’t topple the whole table.

“That tired?” Ryo asked.

“Mmmm.” the pink blob sounded out.

“What was that?” Nijika could be heard hollering from the bar.

“Just Bocchi crash landing. She needs to reboot.” Ryo shouted back.

“Gotcha! Take care of her, will you?”

“Will do, madam Nijika.”

“Don’t make me go over there and bonk you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Nijika-chan, try some of this!” Kita could be heard.

“Please, Kita-chan. I’m getting full from your drinks-urk!” Nijika suddenly stopped, probably forced to drink whatever concoction the redhead made.

Ryo chuckled at the two before tending to Hitori. She instinctively reached for her head and started to massage the pinkhead’s scalp. Realising that Hitori was in fact not her cat, she recoiled.

“S-sorry. Habit.” Ryo said.

“Mmm... don’t m-mind...” Hitori mumbled, too tired to stop her. She wouldn’t even if she could - she was a sucker for physical affection.

Ryo continued to ‘pet’ Hitori, doing the same scruffles and scratches she’d do to Nijicat. Her whole body began to dimly glow, like she was regenerating or something. Ryo wasn’t too bothered; she’d take this light source over Kita’s any day of the week. Although it wasn’t as

serene as with Nijicat (Ryo was self-aware enough to feel a bit weirded out), she felt better. More so for Hitori's company.

Guess I'm becoming a big sap. Eh. Though I am right with Bocchi being like a cat. Score one for Yamada. I'm on a roll.

"Bocchi?" Ryo called to the resting girl.

"Y-yes?" Hitori yawned out.

"Mind if I ask you something?"

"G-go ahead." Hitori turned her head to face Ryo. Where normally Hitori would be thinking about all the possibilities of what Ryo would want to ask about, she was unusually calm. No vibrating, no shapeshifting, not even any weird noises. If Nijika or Kita were here, they'd shower her with praise, before trying to put her back together when Hitori would disintegrate from their praises.

Don't get Ryo wrong, she was proud of Hitori's development. It felt like the pedestal Hitori would put Ryo on was getting lower. She could finally talk with her on the same level.

Or, this was all because she was tired.

...

Yeah, it probably is because she's tired.

With a sigh, Ryo asked.

"Do I seem... different today?"

Hitori took a good look at the bassist, before averting her gaze to make sure she wasn't staring at her face for too long.

"No, not r-really. Maybe a little t-tired." Hitori said.

"You know what I mean, Bocchi." Ryo faced the wall.

“Do I?” Hitori thought for a moment. “W-well, maybe you have changed a bit. E-ever since Nijicat.”

“Elaborate.”

“H-huh?” Hitori asked, completely bamboozled. When Ryo didn’t answer, Hitori obliged. “O-okay. Y-you’ve been smiling more often now. A-and you’ve been t-talking a bit more too. So yeah, you’ve only changed a l-little bit.”

“Hmm.”

A silence was shared between the two, one was too tired to respond while the other didn’t know what to say. Eventually, the guitarist spoke up.

“W-why ask? If anyone knew they’d c-change, it’s you.” Hitori asked, reminiscing about their meetup back in the cafe.

‘Abandoning your uniqueness is equivalent to dying.’ Yeah, I did say that.

“Yeah, you’re right. You’re right Bocchi.” Ryo huffed. “Just wanted someone else to say it instead of me.”

“Why’s t-that?”

“Because I don’t want to admit it.” Ryo mumbled. “Because I don’t like to change.”

Hitori just looked confused, so Ryo continued.

“I’m too cool to miss being with my friends. Too cool to want to have my cat by my side everyday. I’m sounding a bit arrogant, but I feel like I’m becoming soft, Bocchi. A big softie. That fits Nijika, or Kita, or even you. But not me. I’m supposed to be a loner who loves her own time, going to places I want to go and chill with music I want to hear. I know I’m sounding pretty stupid, but I want to be myself. I want to be me. Not someone else I’m not.”

Ryo rubbed her temples.

“And yet, even in my own time, I find myself a little bit empty. Longing to have one of you guys with me. Longing to have Nijicat to pet or something, y’know. Ugh.”

Maybe I was lying to myself. It really is all three of them. And that darn cute, adorable cat.

Ryo buried her face in her hands. Hitori sat there, honestly surprised that Ryo brain-dumped everything she had onto her.

“But, w-what’s wrong with change?” Hitori asked. “Change is what makes everyday so s-special. I think. Change is what brought our band to w-what it is now. Change is... is the reason why I’m here.”

Ryo peeked through her hands.

“The first time I met you guys, I had t-to play in a cardboard box. I b-barely could talk to anyone and was p-pretty pathetic. B-but now! Now I play onstage, with the rest of you! And m-my, umm, customer service has gotten b-better. At least, that’s what Nijika-chan thinks. But if she thinks that, then I must be improving. I can f-finally realise my dream of being in a band with you all.”

Hitori smiled to herself, before turning to Ryo.

“B-but I know change can be scary. Even now, I rather things s-stay the same than change. Change c-can also be bad. Very bad.”

“Yeah. While you’ve been changing for the better, I feel like I’m changing for the worse. Like I’m getting weaker.” Ryo said.

“I d-don’t think that’s weakness, Ryo-san. Because s-sometimes, I feel the same.” Hitori muttered.

“Hmm?”

“M-maybe it’s because you guys are my first friends or because I’m lonely, but I do f-find myself missing you guys when I get home. It f-feels selfish, like I shouldn’t t-take more time out of all of your days because I want to. But, I d-don’t think that’s a bad thing. If anything, t-that just shows our friendship. Or something... I’m not the b-best person to talk about this kind of s-stuff...”

“Hmm.”

Ryo pondered as Hitori watched her digest what she’s heard.

“So, this change isn’t bad?” Ryo genuinely asked.

“Yeah. Besides, it’s only s-slight. You’re still Ryo-san, just like how I’m still the s-same old Bocchi.”

“Heh, right. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“And, you seem m-much happier now. It’s ok to smile, Ryo-san.”
Hitori smiled at Ryo, genuine and shockingly not shaky.

“... yeah. Yeah, I guess it’s ok.” Ryo grinned.

The two sat in a bout of silence.

“Thanks, Bocchi. You’re surprisingly good at cheering people up.”
Ryo patted Hitori’s shoulder.

“Hehehehehe, thanks... eheheheh...” Hitori babbled.

“And, uhh...” Ryo trailed off before stretching out her arms.

“Ryo-san? What a-are you doing?” Hitori asked, sitting up.

“Y-you know. Everyone else’s done it with you, so...” Ryo gestured her head to her arms. It took a second before Hitori got the message.

“A-ah! M-me?”

“Who else?”

“O-okay...” Hitori mumbled, before closing in on Ryo.

*What's with everyone hugging me lately? Am I really that huggable?
Do I need to check my hugging capabilities?*

The hug was awkward, with Ryo's tall stature and Hitori's hesitance to actually wrap her arms around Ryo like if she was made out of glass. It might've lasted a bit longer than either wanted and disengaging for both took a while as neither were sure how long a hug was supposed to last. Eventually, the two ended the hug as Hitori averted her gaze, hoping the wall would turn into a portal for her to jump into. Meanwhile, Ryo would like to learn how to shape shift. Into the floor or something.

That might've been too much. Hugs aren't my thing.

“Let's never do that again.” Ryo stated, slightly blushing in embarrassment.

“Agreed.”

Maybe this change is kind of bad, if it means more awkward hugging. At least with Nijika-chan and Kita-san, they do it so easily...

It took a moment before Ryo spoke up.

“S-so, ahem.” Ryo started. “What kinda music do you listen to, outside of rock? Maybe we could go out to listen to some records sometime?”

Hitori was again surprised at Ryo.

She's inviting me to hang out? Just us two?

...

But I guess that isn't such a bad thing.

“S-sure. A-ah, lately I’ve been listening to...”

“Kita-chan, please. Any more and I’ll have diabetes. Straight to type two diabetes...” Nijika pushed Kita’s hand away from her, which was holding another drink.

“Aw, nonsense. You’re young! Besides, you can just burn off the sugar!” Kita insisted. “This is the last one, promise! I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“... I’m guessing you’re not taking ‘no’ for an answer, huh.”

“Nope!”

Sighing in defeat, Nijika reluctantly swiped the drink from Kita. She took a sip.

“Mmm. This is actually pretty good! I’d like it more if I didn’t already drink five drinks beforehand.” Nijika hummed.

“See? Told you you’d like it!” Kita beamed.

“How do you take in so much sugar?”

“Hmm? Oh, well... I am pretty active outside of band practice Nijika-chan. I sometimes sub for the basketball team at our school.”

“Really? Doesn’t explain how you’ve downed the same amount of drinks I did and aren’t feeling sick.”

“I do have a sweet tooth! Hehe!” Kita pulled a cheeky face.

“No wonder.”

“Well, I also have high metabolism. Runs in our family. We’re a bunch of heavy eaters!”

“Shouldn’t you have said that first?”

“Ehehe, yeah. Anyways, do you not go out a lot, Nijika-chan?”

“Uhh, I kinda only go out when I hangout with friends or with you guys. Maybe I’ll go out if I really need to.” Nijika fiddled with her straw. “Most of the time, I’m in here, helping Sis out in Starry.”

“Ahh. Well, why don’t we go jogging around Shimokitazawa some time? I know you could use the cardio! You can even show me around!” Kita asked.

“Please no.” Nijika squinted her eyes, before shuddering. “Still feel the ache back when we climbed those steps in Enoshima.”

“C’mon, Nijika-chan!” Kita elbowed the blonde. “It wasn’t that bad. We barely climbed those steps before we rode the escalator.”

“You don’t understand, Kita-chan. The heat was unbeaaaaaaaarable...”

“That’s what you get when you spend most of your time here in this air conditioned place!”

Nijika grumbled something incoherent. She hated that Kita was right.

“You know, now that I think about it, you kind of sound like someone in their 30s.” Kita pointed out.

“Ughh, not you too.” Nijika groaned. “Ryo and Sis think the same, especially with how much I diet so that I don’t get fat.”

“But you aren’t fat! See?” Kita prodded at Nijika’s stomach.

“Pfft, st-stop it! I’m ticklish there.”

Kita's eyes shimmered. She was feeling quite mischievous.

“Hehe, then you wouldn’t mind if I did... THIS?” Kita pounced at Nijika, running her fingers along her stomach.

“Hahahahaha, stop! Ahahahahaha...” Nijika continued to laugh, unable to stop her guitarist from strumming her abdomen.

“Girls, please. I don’t pay you to goof off.” Seika peered just above her laptop, watching the two giggle to themselves.

“Manager, with all due respect, there aren't any customers so far. As a humble employee, I think that allowing us to have fun every once in a while, that does not get into the way of work, fosters a great working environment. I’m sure my co-worker, Nijika-chan would agree.” Kita spouted, bowing slightly to the older sister.

“Preach, preach, preach!” PA-san chanted from her corner.

“Haah... y-yeah Sis. There isn’t anyone yet. I think it’s ok for us to goof off just a little bit.” Nijika said.

“Mmmm. Ryo’s rubbing off on you, Kita.” Seika grumbled, going back to her laptop.

“Hehe!” Kita responded.

“Someone’s feeling rather cheeky today. Ow, my stomach...” Nijika rubbed her belly.

“Like I said, you sound old.”

“I’m only a year older and somehow, my dieting, lack of energy nor tolerance of sugar makes me old.” Nijika sighed. “Next year, I’ll be needing a cane to walk.”

“Hahaha, that’s silly!” Kita laughed. “And you don’t have a lack of energy-”

“Compared to you, yeah. I do.”

“Ok, but compared to the other two, I’d say you’re pretty energetic when it counts!”

“Thanks Kita-chan.” Nijika took a sip. “Ahh~”

“Starting to like it more?” Kita asked.

“Sorta. Still sick from all the sugar you fed me.”

“Well, it’s sweet! Sweet like Hitori-chan! You can’t ever get sick of her, now can you?”

“Tsk tsk, trying to paint me as the bad guy, eh?”

“Of course not, senpai!”

Both laughed.

“Speaking of Bocchi-chan, I’m glad she’s been getting better, both in the band and her job.” Nijika said.

“Yeah! Plus, she’s real good to talk to. You wouldn’t think someone who’s quite reclusive to have a way with words.” Kita added.

“Well, she is our lyricist. And she makes some fine good lyrics too.”

“Mhmm! I always like reading them - it makes me feel like I get to know Hitori-chan more.”

“Yup. Bocchi-chan sure has been a blessing to us, huh.” Nijika smiled.

“Yeah.” Kita agreed.

“You both sound like her mother. Ryo’s right.” Seika commented.

“Well, it’s just that we care for her, ok?” Nijika deflected. “I’m not that old...”

“I wouldn’t mind being her mother.” Kita blurted.

“What?” / “What.”

Both sisters turned to the redhead.

“That’s weird, Kita-chan. You’re weird.” Nijika stated.

“It does run in the family~” Kita joked.

“Augh! No! Weird!”

“I meant my family, but ok~”

“I-but !! Ughh...” Nijika gave up on defending herself. “Next thing you know, you say that you want to be her girlfriend or something.”

“G-g-girlfriend?” Kita shrieked.

“Yeah, girlfriend. That’s what I said?”

“Oooh~” PA-san cooed. “Someone might have a crush on Bocchi-chan~”

“What?!? Me? No, pssshhh. It can’t be me. There’s better people out there for her. We don’t even have that much chemistry. Sure, we’re the ideal ‘opposites attract’ kind of couple - I mean, if we were a couple, which we aren’t - and sure, I feel like Hitori-chan’s more comfortable with me, even with my energetic personality. And sure, we spent a lot of time together, even outside of guitar practice. And sure, I really, really, really enjoy her company. But, that doesn’t mean anything, right? Hahahahaha...” Kita spouted and spouted, face now matching her hair.

“I’m not against it, y’know. I’m sure you’ll take care of Bocchi-chan fine!” Nijika patted Kita on the back.

“But I don’t like her! Well, not *like* like her! I just like her! Like a sister!” Kita wailed, shaking Nijika violently.

“Urk! Kita-chan, please... I don’t want to puke...”

“Oh, sorry!” Kita let go of Nijika, mumbling, “Serves you right though...”

“So, like a pseudo-sister? Sister from another mother?” Nijika asked, making sure that her insides stayed inside.

“Yeah! Like that!” Kita agreed. “Maybe it’s because I’m an only child in my own family. I’d like a sister...”

“Mmm. Just let me know if any... developments happen.” Nijika smirked. “Who knows? Love can come in mysterious ways, Kita-chan.”

“Nijika-chan!”

“Though, that really means that you got over Ryo, hmm?” Nijika pondered.

“Mhmm.”

“What changed?”

“Well...”

...

“Huh, that’s neat. You finally see her without the rose-tinted glasses. Good on you!” Nijika gave a thumbs up.

“Yup! I guess all the time I’ve spent with Hitori-chan really wanted me to know Ryo better. So, I started to push aside my affections to notice her.” Kita said.

“Mhmm! She’s a great friend, but a horrible person.”

“She’s not that horrible, Nijika-chan. She composes our music and is a vital part of our band!”

“I was exaggerating.”

“Oh.”

“Heh, she’s not all bad though.” Nijika laughed. “She’s pretty funny and fun to banter with.”

“True! And I s-still think she’s hot. Especially with her choice of clo-”

“Same. Very hot.”

...

“What?” Kita turned to Nijika.

“What?”

Kita giggled.

“Here you were, ribbing me about liking Hitori-chan, when you probably like Ryo-chan even more!”

“Wha-no! I’d never like t-that blue idiot! Like I said, never date bassists! Ever!” Nijika defended herself, flustered and waving her hands frantically. “I mean, you find Bocchi-chan attractive, right?”

“Hmm, yeah I do. But you said that Ryo-chan’s very hot~” Kita poked at Nijika’s cheek. “That’s different. C’mon, just say that you like-”

“I HAVE DECIDED TO END THIS CONVERSATION. I WILL NOW GO TO THE STORAGE ROOM AND, err... JUGGLE CARDBOARD BOXES. TO HELP WITH STARRY. YES. I BID YOU FAREWELL, KITA-CHAN.” Nijika robotically shouted, before awkwardly stumbling towards the storage room.

“Uhh... ok? Bye?” Kita waved.

“She learnt that from Ryo.” Seika said. “She’s never good with romance. Especially when it’s about herself. She’s a glass canon when it comes to that. All talk, no bite.”

Kita's face was still confused.

"I'm as shocked as you are, but just let it be. She'll be good in a moment or two. I think." Seika sighed. "I'm probably going to close Starry soon, seeing as there's nobody coming in today. Go check up on the other two."

"O-okay Manager." Kita stuttered, before walking to the front door.

She didn't seem shocked though...

"H-hey guys. Manager's planning to close up early, so I just wanted to check up on you... two?" Kita said, finding Ryo stroking a sleepy Hitori's hair.

"Oh, hey Kita." Ryo waved. "Bocchi's pretty tired, so you'll probably have to bring her home."

"Noooo, ish fiiiiinnneee... I'mma big girl." Hitori slurred her speech.

"See? Tired."

"What did you guys do?" Kita asked.

"We just talked. Bocchi's had a long day."

"She's okay with you stroking her hair?"

"Yup. It's pretty silky and smooth. Here, you try."

"Uh, okay." Kita placed her hand on the pinkhead's hair. Truth be told, she always wanted to stroke Hitori's hair. Out of curiosity, of course. It was so long and somewhat well-kempt. Giving headpats wasn't enough. Objectively speaking, of course. Patting someone's head was different to stroking their hair. Everyone knows that, of course.

"Oh, wow. You're right! It is very smooth. Kind of fluffy too." Kita kept running her fingers through. "Hitori-chan, you got to tell me what

shampoo you use!”

“Hehehehe, y-yeaaaah... shampoo... hehehe...” Hitori babbled.

“She’s funnier when she’s tired.” Ryo said.

“And you can’t take her yourself?” Kita asked.

“Nope. I wanna hang out with Nijika before I go.”

“But don’t you want to see Hitori-chan’s-ohhh.” Kita realised, donning a sly grin. “I see now, hehe.”

“See what?”

“Don’t worry about it, Ryo-chan. Don’t you worry.”

“You’re scaring me, Kita.”

“Here, let me take Hitori-chan off your hands.” Kita helped Hitori up as the sleepy guitarist leaned on Kita’s shoulder.

“Y-you don’t mind taking me, *yawn*, me h-home?” Hitori asked, almost protesting.

“Of course I don’t mind!” Kita exclaimed.

“O-ok. Thanks...”

“Manager! I’m going to take Hitori-chan home! She’s pretty tired!” Kita yelled into Starry.

“Gotcha. Nijika and Ryo will be enough to pack away everything. Thanks again for your help. Take care.” Seika yelled back.

“Take care, you two!” PA-san yelled, a bit faint.

“We will! Let’s go, Hitori-chan?” Kita asked her dozing friend.

“... yeah, I-let’s. Don’t drop me, o-ok?” Hitori mumbled.

“Now why would I do that? Oh yeah, before I go. Ryo-chan?”

“Hmm?” Ryo perked up.

“Go get her, tiger.” Kita lowered her voice.

“Huh?”

“Kita-san, wh-what did you mean by that...” Hitori’s voice trailed off as Kita left Starry, leaving Ryo to sit there dumbfounded.

Huh?

Shaking herself out of confusion, Ryo slowly walked down the steps and to the bar. She was surprised to not see Nijika there.

“If you’re looking for Niji, she’s in the storage room. Juggling boxes, I think.” Seika jabbed her thumb to the storage.

“Thanks Manager.” Ryo said. “But, why?”

“She did your technique of getting out of a conversation. I thought you meant it as a joke?”

“I did.”

“Ahh. Yeah, that makes more sense. Anyways, please get my sister out of the storage room.”

“Aye aye, Manager.” Ryo saluted, before heading into the storage room.

Seika shook her head.

She’s such a dork sometimes. Wait, is she-

“I didn’t mean literally!” Seika yelled as Ryo dragged Nijika out of the room and plopped her next to Seika.

“Phew! That should be the last of it! Good thing nobody came in today, else our cleanup would’ve been longer. Right, Ryo?” Nijika wiped her brow.

“Mmm.” Ryo grunted, laying on one of the tables.

“Geez, even that was tiring for you? Where would you be without me?”

“Probably without a job. Out in the cold rain. Homeless. Starving and thirsty.”

“Yeah right. Except that last part. That makes sense.”

Nijika sat down across from Ryo, idly swinging her legs.

“Hey, lemon head.”

“Hey, blueberry supreme.”

“Blueberry supreme?” Ryo snickered. “That’s a new one.”

“Thanks!”

Both sat in comfortable silence.

“You really used the thing I told you about?” Ryo spoke up. Nijika flinched.

“N-no?” Nijika attempted to deflect, but seeing that Ryo was far from convinced, she gave up. “Ok, yes! I did!”

“Why?”

“Because, Kita-chan wasn’t being fair and she just had to mention me liking you, which is crazy amirite? So, the first thing that came to my-”

“Wait. Kita thinks you like me?”

“M... maybe.”

Ryo burst into laughter. Nijika sagged even more.

“S-sorry, it’s just I don’t know what’s funnier: the fact that you did the thing I said was a joke or Kita thinks that you like me.” Ryo calmed down, wiping a tear.

“Well, both are pretty funny.” Nijika chuckled. “But just to be clear, in no universe am I ever dating you.”

“I thought that was obvious? Then Starry would be bankrupt from all the times I ask for money.”

“You wish.” Nijika bonked Ryo.

“Ow.”

As the two sat, Ryo found herself scooting closer to Nijika as she started to headpat her.

“Ryo? I didn’t even ask for it. N-not that I mind. Mmmm...” Nijika hummed into Ryo’s touch.

“Sorry. Habit.” Ryo apologised, though her hand did not leave Nijika’s hair.

Nijika’s like a Nijicat 2. Hmm, nope. Add that to the list of things that will get me murdered by Nijika. Which is getting considerably long. I should be concerned.

This is technically Chapter 8, but the current title sounds too cool.

A chill chapter, nothing much happens. I wrote the first part of this in homage to the first ever chapter. Seems centuries ago since I wrote that.

Ryo and Bocchi get a moment. I noticed that the two don't really get to talk in this fic, so I wanted to fix that. Ryo has image issues fr fr, but Bocchi is wise fr fr.

I am writing these characters kind of ambiguous when it comes to relationships, since that's not something I want to focus on in this fic. They're just good friends, trust me. Feel free to ship them though.

Next chapter whenever!

EDIT: made sure Kita's metabolism is mentioned here. future me just had to add that in the newer chapters. thanks future me.

Chapter 8 (part 1)

Chapter 13: Chapter 8 (part 1)

Ryo goes to driving school. Kita and Hitori talk.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“I’ve told her that she keeps us together, and she wouldn’t believe it.”

“Well, you know Bocchi. Downplays ‘til someone dumps a cold bucket on her.”

“Don’t be so harsh Ryo. She’s still growing... Y’know what I mean!”

“You make it sound like she’s a toddler.”

“Shut up!”

“A little baby.”

“I said shut up!”

The blonde and the blueberry were strolling the streets of Shimokitazawa, just gotten ready for Ryo’s driving lesson. It was later in the afternoon, but Nijika insisted on getting ready earlier, knowing how awful Ryo is with time management. Unfortunately, that meant she had to cancel practice today, but the guitarist pair were alright with it, even excited to spectate Ryo’s driving. On the other hand, Nijika was expecting reality to happen.

I’ve got enough elbow and knee guards for everyone. Just in case she crashes into the building.

"Though I'm happy to hear that you talked it out with her." Nijika said.
"Can't do all the heavy lifting here."

"Yeah." Ryo replied. "She's got soft hair too."

"Really Ryo?"

"What? It really was soft."

The two entered the train bound for the nearby city. Shimokitazawa was too tightly packed to have a driving course, and Ryo's parents insisted that she learn how to drive in a driving school with one. Maybe even Ryo's own parents feared for the worst.

"That doesn't answer why you didn't talk with me about it first." Nijika sat down. "Not saying that it's a bad thing! But-"

"Yeah, yeah. I get ya." Ryo cut her off, slumping on Nijika.

"Ryo, we barely walked anywhere."

"I need to save my energy. It's a matter of life or death out there."

"You're being dramatic."

"No, I'm not."

...

At least Ryo knows it too. But being self-aware doesn't mean you're excused from doing something about it!

"Is it because I'd tease you about it?" Nijika asked, shuffling to get comfortable with Ryo's weight on her.

"Mmm." Ryo hummed in approval.

"I didn't tease you that hard."

“Nijika, when I told you this morning, you literally couldn’t stop laughing for the whole of Math; then you realised that I had a ‘Shadow the Hedgehog’ moment - which by the way, I did not - and wouldn’t stop pestering me about it.” Ryo stopped to take a deep breath.

“Ok, maybe I did went-”

“And then our classmates started asking who this ‘Shadow the Hedgehog’ was, so you pushed me to explain to them about it, saying that it was ‘conversation practice’.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry for-”

“And then, after that public embarrassment, the teachers then asked who ‘Shadow the Hedgehog’ was. So I had to explain to them as well, and reassure them that I was nothing like ‘Shadow the Hedgehog’. Oh my gosh, that was so cringeeee...” Ryo reminisced, hiding her face in her hands.

Nijika sighed at the trembling bassist.

“I’m sorry, Ryo. Really.” Nijika apologised.

“I know you are. Doesn’t make me feel any better.” Ryo said. “It was pretty funny, all things considered.”

“Well then, what would make you feel better?”

“Now you’re speaking my language. You see, I saw this bass pedal in one of the stores back in-”

“How about I just pat you on the head and be nice for the rest of the day?”

“But... there’s no monetary value...”

“Friendship is a lot more valuable than that!”

“No it isn’t. How much is friendship? Can you even put a price tag on-”

“Ughh, Ryooo...” Nijika lightly shook Ryo.

“Wah.”

“Why do you have to be so difficult sometimes?”

“And why do you have to take care of me all the time? I’m an independent, young woman.”

“Independent, my butt. I’m the reason why you still have money in your wallet!”

“Point taken. However, I disagree.”

“For what reason?”

“Because I say so. And I’m always right.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Yep.”

The back and forth kept going on, until Nijika gave up, chuckling to herself.

“We’re such dorks.” Nijika muttered.

“You mean, you are.” Ryo ‘corrected’.

“Whatever you say, blueberry cheesecake.”

“Speaking of blueberry cheesecake, I was wondering if we could-”

“No.”

“Aww...”

The two sat in silence as the train jostled, the passing rays of sunshine peering in through the windows. With the amount of times they’ve rode the train, the familiar vibrations reverberated through their bodies, finding rest in a cramped environment.

“I don’t think you’re getting soft or weak, Ryo.” Nijika broke the silence.

“Hmm?”

“This must be some weird, roundabout way of saying that you’re starting to really like our company.” Nijika hit the nail in the coffin. “And... guessing by your lack of reaction, you... actually, I have no idea what to say - that’s your go-to reaction!”

“Hmm.” Ryo pondered. “I’d be a horrible reactor online. Gotta cross that out of potential future jobs...”

“Hey! Am I right?”

Ryo took a moment to respond.

“Yeah. You’re right.” Ryo mumbled. “Ughh, I hate admitting it though. It doesn’t suit me.”

“What, being honest?”

“No, just... saying something so embarrassing... like that.”

“C’mon Ryo, it’s normal for people to love their friends! Like, I love you all! And, Bocchi-chan loves us all! And Kita-chan too!”

“Mmmmm... easy for you to say.”

Nijika sighed again at her blue friend.

“I guess you still need to get used to it, hmm?” Nijika said.

“Yeah.” Ryo exhaled.

“Though I do agree, it is kind of a whiplash coming from you. From me or Kita-chan, that’d probably be normal.” Nijika snapped her fingers. “That’s why I said you had a ‘Shadow the Hedgehog’ moment!”

“Please... don’t remind me...” Ryo whimpered.

“What? Edgy hedgehog is too cool for school, then meets a bunch of unlikely friends and realises that hanging out with them is fun, but he doesn’t show it because he’s toooo cool.”

“You’re not making me feel any better...”

“Yeah I know. Just messing with ya.” Nijika fistbumped Ryo’s forehead.

“Ow.”

“Just... stop thinking of it as a bad thing, ok? Try to have fun today, Bocchi-chan and Kita-chan will be there to cheer you on. I’m here too.”

“Really? Couldn’t tell.” Ryo quipped to a deadpanned Nijika. “Ok, yeah. I’ll... try. Thanks, Nijika.”

“Anytime, my blue-headed amigo. That’s Spanish for ‘friend’.”

“Wow, so educational. I forgot to bring my notebook, teacher.”

“Oh, shut it you.”

Both giggled and settled down.

This side of Ryo is cute.

“Bocchi’s way better at cheering up people. Minus points, Nijika. I’m disappointed.”

“Oh, shut it you!”

“Why won’t they let us in yet? We clearly are here for Ryo-chan’s driving lessons!” Kita grumbled as she slumped just outside of the driving school.

“W-we are a bit e-early, Kita-san. A bit too e-early...” Hitori said, slumping next to Kita. “Let’s just w-wait until Ryo-san and Nijika-chan a-arrive.”

“Hmph.”

The two awkwardly sat by the entrance.

...

“Maybe we s-should sit somewhere else.” Hitori pointed to a nearby bench.

“Yeah.”

Now having relocated to a more suitable place, the two settled down. Kita mindlessly scrolled through her phone, while Hitori started to people-watch.

Heh, that guy has a funny dog. I think that’s a poodle? Oh, and that woman has a nice hat. I don’t think I could wear something as flashy as that. Maybe Kita-san could. Hmm, it is a bit big. A small one would definitely fit her. Ah, that guy has a suitcase. I wonder where he’s going? Must be late to work - he’s trying his best to get a move on. But, he’s also holding flowers, so I’m not sure-

“You alright, Hitori-chan?” Kita placed her hand on Hitori’s shoulder, jolting her out of her thoughts. “You’ve been staring hard at some

passersby.”

“S-sorry. Just people watching...”

“People... watching?”

“Y-yeah. You, umm, d-don’t know?”

“Oh, I sometimes do! When I get bored of my phone. It’s not something I would actively do, though.”

“O-oh, yeah. Especially with someone a-as outgoing as y-you. I mean, i-if you want to get to know someone, y-you can just go up to them and talk, y-y’know? I could never, I’d p-probably die on the spot. W-wither away or explode or s-something.” Hitori rambled, deflating ever so slightly.

“Hitori-chan, don’t speak so badly about yourself! I mean, people watching tends to get a bit boring but-wah! I didn’t mean it like that! Sorry!” Kita tried to inflate Hitori, who was gone limp on the bench.

“I-it’s ok. Different tastes, r-right?” Hitori gave a small smile, with the other guitarist smiling as well. “B-but, people watching is p-pretty fun. Wanna do it w-with me?”

“Geez, Hitori-chan, you make it sound so scandalous~” Kita cooed. “Ok then!”

Trying to ignore Kita’s teasing, Hitori looked around for someone to target. Kita watched as Hitori surveyed the area.

Kind of like an owl. With her big eyes. It’s soooooo cute!

“A-ah. See that guy w-with the flip flops?” Hitori pointed as Kita followed her finger to be pointing at a man wearing a floral shirt, khaki pants and bright flip flops. He was on a phone call, twirling a pair of sunglasses with his free hand.

“Him? What about him?” Kita asked, intrigued by Hitori’s choice.

Hitroi rambled. “W-well, don’t you think it’s a bit w-weird that he’s wearing clothes like that? I mean, we’re in the m-middle of the city, and he’s looking like he’s going t-to the beach or something. So, that gets me thinking that m-maybe he missed his train and he’s c-calling his family that he’ll be late to the beach. But, d-does he have a family? There doesn’t s-seem to be a ring on his-ok, yeah. He doesn’t have a r-ring, so he’s probably calling his friends. Or workmates. Or, he c-could be divorced and is desperately calling his ex w-wife to make amends before he goes to the beach? Hard to t-tell from his stance. He is kind of standing in...”

Kita stopped listening after a minute of Hitori’s rambling, catching a “he could’ve been teleported from another universe, where there was a beach here.” and a “maybe he has an alternate dimension family?” She was impressed by the girl’s imagination, no doubt. But...

Isn’t she being a bit judgemental? Is she like this with everyone?

“... so y-yeah. Sorry if th-that was a bit much, I usually s-say this in my mind.” Hitori apologised.

“Umm... cool! Hahah, y-yeah.” Kita slightly pumped her fist. “To be honest, that was a lot. B-but, it’s cool to hear how you think!”

“S-sorry...”

“Please, don’t apologise. I don’t have a creative mind like you, so when I people watch I just wonder for a little bit.”

“A-ah...” Hitori twiddled her fingers.

“Maybe I should try! Practice makes perfect, right?”

“Uh, s-sure. Go ahead...”

Hmm, this gives me an idea!

“Ok, but to make this interesting... guess who I’m describing!”

“Eh? O-ok.”

Kita nodded in determination, looking around for the perfect person.

“Oooh. Ok! So, it’s a girl. Oh, kind of young too! Like us! Maybe she goes to school? But from her posture, maybe she doesn’t? It’s rare for young girls like her not to go to school. Anyways, it looks like she has a backpack of some kind. A funny looking one.”

“Mhmm.” Hitori hummed.

Maybe Kita-san has better eyesight than I do. Everyone around us looks older...

“Like it would hold something long. A fishing rod? Probably not. Then, a pole? But for what? It is a bit eccentric to carry a pole around. And why a young girl out of everyone? Ok, I’m getting distracted! She... oh my gosh, she’s cute! Like, super cute!”

“Mhmm?”

Leave it to Kita-san to find cute things. Strange, there’s nowhere here to fish. Hmm.

“She’s got big, round eyes. I think they’re blue? Such a nice eye colour! Oh, and now seeing her again, she’s wearing a school uniform skirt. So, she definitely goes to school. But what school? Most likely a nearby school. But we haven’t seen any schools nearby here, so maybe she goes to school quite far from here. That means she probably takes the train to get here. Oh dear!”

“Mmmm...”

Skirt? I don’t see anyone around here wearing a skirt. And this person kind of sounds like me...

“Enough about that, let’s talk about her character. Like I said, her posture is quite bad, so maybe she’s introverted. Y’know, timid, shy, doesn’t want people to notice her. But, she doesn’t look like she’d do

anything bad. In fact, she looks like a total sweetheart! Which goes well with her cuteness. Kyaa! She's adorable!"

"Mm..."

I wonder who this is. It can't be me, I'm not cute. Or a sweetheart. But Kita-san did say she's shy.

"Right, sorry. I'm getting distracted by her cuteness. Although if I had to comment, she'd definitely be cuter with a straighter back. Head held higher, a little bit more puff in her chest and more confidence in her stance, and she'd be a lady-killer! Or a man-killer. Not sure if she swings that way. I don't want to be too assuming, haha!"

"M..."

Isn't that a bit harsh? But, from looking around, the only person with horrible posture, blue eyes, a funny backpack and wearing a school uniform skirt is...

"M-ME?!?!"

"What, nooo~" Kita bashfully said. "Why would I choose you, out of this many people? That'd be... y-yeah, it is you."

Hitori's horrified expression remained on her face for some time, etched in there like a statue. Kita could only stare, thinking if she should wave her hand in front of her to see if she responds. Or if she's still conscious. That is, until she saw the pinkhead slowly thaw out, giggling to herself. When the giggling wouldn't stop and started to borderline be creepy, Kita spoke.

"Umm, Hitori-chan? You alright? Hope it wasn't too shocking..."

"Hehe... she thinks I'm adorable... ehehehehe..." Hitori giggled, already lost in her own world.

"Hitori-chan?"

“Ehehehehe... I’m cute... hehehehehehehe... adorable...”

“What’d you do to Bocchi-chan now?” Nijika said, shooting an accusing glance at the redhead.

“Ah, Nijika-chan! I just described herself, that’s all! Promise!” Kita defended.

Nijika looked at Hitori, who was now in a fetal position, repeatedly giggling and mentioning all the compliments Kita gave her.

“What kinda compliments did you say to her?” Nijika said, before shushing Kita. “Op! Nevermind, we can’t have her spiral even longer.”

“Sorry! Oh, where’s Ryo-chan? She’s going to be late for her lessons.”

“Right behind me.”

Kita looked over to see Ryo latching onto Nijika for dear life. She could see light dents on the ground, probably from Nijika dragging the bassist here.

“Oh, hey.” Ryo greeted. “Don’t mind me, just hanging out.”

“I had to drag this buffoon all the way from the train station.” Nijika grumbled. “I hope you’re happy with your newfound dents in your shoes, Ryo!”

“Why would I be happy?”

“Grr...”

“Now, now, Nijika-chan. She still has driving lessons!” Kita tried to defuse.

“Yeah, she does. Don’t make me throw you in the car.” Nijika grunted.

“Of course. But, hold on. I need to prepare.” Ryo detached from Nijika’s back.

Geez, doesn’t Ryo know how much taller she is than me? My back’s gonna hurt for a week because of her...

“Prepare what?”

“Kita, I’m gonna need the bench.” Ryo said.

“Oh, s-sure? But what are you going to-oh.” Kita deflated as she witnessed her cool bassist reduced to a rocking baby, similar to Hitori. Ryo kept repeating, “I’m gonna pass, I’m too cool to crash a car, I got this...” and other words of... affirmation?

“Ehehehehehe... I’m cute... hhehehehehehehehehehe...” Hitori continued to giggle, right next to Ryo.

“Well, at least they... match?” Nijika stretched her back. “We’re early anyways, so we aren’t in a hurry.”

“Umm, yeah...” Kita awkwardly scratched her cheek.

“So, you and Bocchi-chan are here awfully early. Even earlier than us.”

“Oh, I just got really excited to see Ryo-chan’s driving! Although, I’m less excited now seeing her like... that.” Kita pointed to the bumbling bassist, still hyping herself up.

“Just be glad you didn’t hear from her first time here.” Nijika shook her head. There was a reason why she brought those knee guards. Speaking of which...

“Oh, before I forget... here! Extra protection.” Nijika handed Kita a pair of knee guards; one for her, and one for Hitori. “In case she, y’know...”

“Have a little more faith in her, Nijika-chan! I’m sure she’ll be fine!” Kita exclaimed, glancing at Ryo. “But I will be taking these. How do you have so many?”

“I used to roller-skate once. Haven’t found the time to get back into it though.”

“Really? You have to show me how to roller-skate!” Kita blasted her aura.

“Uhh, yeah. O-once I find the time, Kita-chan.” Nijika instinctively raised her hand and squinted.

“Yay! Hehe, truth be told I always wanted to learn how to do that. Ever since I was little!”

“Really? Didn’t think you’d be the type to roller-skate. It’s pretty dangerous when you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Yeah, but I’ll have you by my side!” Kita said. “I feel much safer when I’m with you.”

“W-whoa, there. Save that line for the love of your life, not me. Hahah…” Nijika deflected, making Kita blush a storm. “But, thanks. As the leader of Kessoku Band, I’m glad I’m doing my job.”

“Meow!”

“Oh, hey Nijicat! You’re looking adorable today!” Kita knelt down to pet the newcomer.

“Wha-where did it come from?” Nijika flabbergasted, putting on a mask. “It’s like Ryo can summon Nijicat wherever, whenever. Creepy.”

“I think that’s kind of cool!” Kita got up, brushing her skirt. “Hopefully Nijicat can help with Ryo now!”

“Oh, true. Her lesson is about to start. Ryo, get your butt off! You’re gonna be late!” Nijika shouted at Ryo.

“But, I can’t...” Ryo clasped her hand. “I cannot risk innocent lives. Their families. Their children.”

“Well, at least she’s back to normal.” Kita took another look. “Sort of.”

“Ryo, please. Think of your parents! They trusted me to get you to learn, and I am going to try my hardest to get you into that building!” Nijika shouted, attempting to hoist up Ryo. “I... did not... hmmng, come this far... to-woah!”

“But alas! I must go on. How cruel are those who have nurtured me! Will I continue their legacy?” Ryo dramatically exclaimed, hopping off Nijika and standing on the bench in cinematic fashion. Poor blonde fell onto the floor.

“Woah! So theatrical! You got to give it to her, Ryo-chan can be very dramatic when she wants!” Kita said to Nijika, earning a well-deserved glare. “What?”

“No. I mustn’t, I shan’t! Gone are the tyrannical days of the Yamada. Today, that changes. Today, I stand up against the forces of evil. Today, I will not drive!”

Kita applauded while Nijika just grumbled on the floor. Somehow, Ryo’s theatrics pulled Hitori out of her Bocchi Time.

“W-wow, that was a-amazing, Ryo-san...” Hitori said, astonished.

“Thank you, Bocchi. Watching all that English theatre was worth. Perhaps we can incorporate more theatrics into our live performances.”

“Yeah! Especially since we’re considering tap dancing too! We’d be so unique!” Kita affirmed.

“Oh, hey Nijicat.” Ryo noticed the orange furball, already petting it in a heartbeat.

“Yeah sure, go to your cat’s aid. I’m fine just sitting on the floor. Oh yeah, it’s suuuuper comfy here. Mhmm. Nothing wrong with me! Yep.” Nijika muttered, crossing her arms. Hitori noticed the blonde, swiftly helping her up. “Thanks, Bocchi-chan. You good?”

“Y-yeah.” Hitori flashed a smile, unusually glowing with radiance.

“Kita-chan’s rubbing off on you.” Nijika said, squinting.

“Huh?”

“Nevermind.”

“C’mon, Ryo-chan! At least follow through the lessons so that your parents’ money isn’t wasted!” Kita tried to convince Ryo.

“Didn’t you hear my spiel? I can’t.” Ryo replied.

“Ughh...” Nijika groaned, walking up to the bassist. “Look, we already had this conversation on the train, but I’ll say it again. You’re not doing this just for you. Think of the future, Ryo. We’ll be able to play in so many different places once you learn how to drive! We’ll be able to branch out, spread our band’s name across the country! And hey, it’s only a few weeks of suffering; compared to the years of fame we’ll have. So please. Learn how to drive? For Kessoku Band?”

“You know, you being shorter than me makes this-”

“Don’t make me punch you.”

“Right, right.” Ryo sighed, looking down at her cat. “You’re right. I am being a bit selfish.”

Ryo looked at her friends.

“I realise now that, yeah, I have been kind of self-centred. I’m so used to thinking about myself that I forgot to see that I have other people to think about. Others that actually care about me. I’m... sorry guys. And...” Ryo lifted her cat. “Thank you, Nijicat. For making me realise my wrongdoings.”

“Aww, I’m glad to hear Ryo-chan...” Kita placed her hand on her heart, touched by how genuine Ryo was.

Meanwhile, Nijika was fuming.

What do you mean, “Thank you, Nijicat.” That cat did diddly-squat! I told her, not that cat! Me! Nijika Ijichi! And I bet she pulled that speech off out of her butt. Psh, genuine. Yeah, right! I’ve been saying ‘butt’ too many times today! Aghh!

“N-Nijika-chan... calm d-down, please...” Hitori soothed Nijika, to no effect.

“I’m not getting jealous of a cat, I’m not getting jealous of a cat, I’m not getting jealous of a cat, I’m not...” Nijika repeated to herself, using all of her might to control herself and not clobber her idiot of a friend in the head.

“Which is why...” Ryo turned to Kita, pointing to a nearby vending machine. “... I need some money to buy a drink. Can’t go in without properly hydrating-”

Kita punched Ryo in the arm.

“Oww...”

“Did it hurt?” Kita asked.

“Y-yeah? Why do you-”

“Good. And did you make up that speech right now?”

When Ryo didn’t answer, Kita punched her again.

What's with extroverted people being so violent? And violent with me, it seems?

"Oww..." Ryo rubbed her arm. "Don't you find it charming?"

Kita sighed. "Yes, I do. -Ish. Doesn't mean it's still a horrible trait of yours." Kita's voice did a 180. "Now c'mon Ryo-chan! You'll be late!"

"... alright, fine." Ryo joined Kita in walking inside the building, bringing Nijicat with her. "You know Kita, driving requires my left arm."

"I didn't punch you that hard, Ryo-chan..." Kita trailed off as they entered the building.

The guitarist and drummer were left behind, the latter ready to explode at any minute.

"I need to punch something." Nijika grunted. She needed to unleash the Ijichi rage inside her, and she couldn't punch Ryo, with her driving lesson coming up. She was really glad that she still can be considerate, even though she wants to rip Ryo to shreds. So badly.

Their friendship runs deep.

"Y-you can punch m-me?" Hitori suggested, spreading her arms wide and squinting away. "M-my body is r-r-ready! I c-can take it!"

"Bocchi-chan... no." Nijika pulled Hitori's arm to follow the other two in the building. "I can never hit you. I'll just slug Ryo after her lesson."

"Oh, o-ok." Hitori shuddered, again reminded of how violent Nijika can be with Ryo.

"I-I appreciate your enthusiasm, Miss Yamada, but I'm afraid pets aren't allowed in the vehicle." her instructor said, raising an eyebrow at the bassist holding Nijicat.

“But it's my therapy cat. Nijicat helps me focus really well. Ask Nijika, she can tell you about my condition.” Ryo said, slightly turning to Nijika for her to speak.

Happy thoughts, happy thoughts, happy thoughts. Save ripping her to shreds after the lesson, Nijika. Think of what Mom would want you to do.

“Um-um, yes! S-sorry she hasn't mentioned this UNTIL NOW...” Nijika spoke through gritted teeth. “... but it is true, sir. Her, umm, therapist suggested that she have a companion accompany her during stressful situations, and her parents got her a cat.”

“And, how do you know of this, Miss Ijichi?”

“Haha, I'm a really close friend of the Yamadas, sir.” Nijika awkwardly laughed. When she saw that the instructor wasn't convinced, she leaned in to whisper, “Trust me sir, it's better to just roll with it. Ryo can be very difficult.”

The instructor sighed. “Yes, Miss Ijichi, I am very aware of how hard-headed your friend here is. Fine. The cat can stay, and so can you Miss Ijichi.”

“Thank you for your kindness.” / “Thank you, sir.”

“Now, get in here so that we can start.” The instructor unlocked the doors. As Nijika took a seat, the instructor added, “Ah, Miss Yamada! Remember, before you go in!”

“Uhh, toooo...” Ryo droned on. “... to make sure the car isn't broken?”

“Mmmm, close enough. Please, check all of the car's features to ensure that your car is well-equipped for safe driving.”

“It should be, considering that you're getting me to drive it.”

“Miss Yamada... please.”

“Alright.” Ryo started to walk around, checking each part of the car. It was more like Ryo squinting really hard at certain parts and giving the green light if it didn’t have any dent/scratch on it.

“Well, at least she’s... trying?” Nijika said.

“Yes, Miss Ijichi, she is.” The instructor said, clicking his pen to write some notes.

C’mon, Ryo! At least try to show him that you’ve learnt something! Ughh, hopefully the others aren’t waiting too long...

MEANWHILE...

“You want us to have a guitar lesson here? Right now?” Kita asked, scooting closer to the corner they chose to sit in.

“A-ah, yes. W-while we wait for them.” Hitori replied, setting up her guitar. “W-we can’t play too loud though.”

“You know, that’s more of a ‘you’ problem, Hitori-chan. Always shredding like crazy~”

“A-ah-augh-ehh, h-huh?”

“I’m just teasing you. Let’s start?”

“U-uh, umm, y-yes.”

The two chose to sit by the window, overlooking a good view of the driving course. It was perfect, since not many other people were there and thankfully nobody was taking any written tests, so the two could play. Kita had to explain to the staff that they were going to be quiet, before stopping Hitori from offering her life in compensation for disrupting the serene environment of a driving school. Kita was amazed that Hitori could find such a place serene.

Not having any upcoming lives, the two opted to strum away, letting the music take them wherever. With Kita’s improvement and the help

of Ryo's improv lessons, she was able to keep up and even compliment Hitori's playing. She was starting to find it quite relaxing, relating with the pinkhead.

"A-ah, Kita-san?" Hitori stopped playing.

"Yes, Hitori-chan?"

"I-it's much easier to play what you played like this." Hitori demonstrated, showing Kita a much more efficient way of playing.

"Yeah! That seems way better! It's just that my wrist still gets tired." Kita said. "I can manage during performances, but after extensive practice I have to start using my whole arm to avoid cramps."

"Y-you get cramps?" Hitori asked, surprised to hear. Kita's never told her this.

"Oh, I guess I never told you, huh." Kita rubbed her wrist. "Sorry, Hitori-chan. But yes, I did get wrist cramps from playing a lot."

She's been practising outside of our lessons? I mean, I do the same, but it sounds like she's been playing way more than I do. She's really committed.

"Hitori-chan? Don't cry!" Kita said, waving her hands upon seeing Hitori tear up.

"A-ah, sorry! Sorry! I'm g-good!" Hitori reassured. "Just... touched by y-your commitment is a-all. You must've b-been playing a lot, outside of band practice and o-our lessons..."

"O-oh. Well, y-yeah! I love playing guitar with you guys! And, y'know. All that stuff I said before about catching up." Kita twiddled with her hair. "Don't worry, I haven't been hard on myself, Hitori-chan. Been busy practising."

"A-and you've been taking b-breaks? You don't have calluses like m-me, ah! Not saying like t-that's a bad thing!"

“Haha, of course I know. You have years of experience and dedication, while I’ve...” Kita shook her head. “No. I’ll get to your level someday Hitori-chan. Just you wait!”

“I... look forward to seeing that.” Hitori rubbed her eyes. She appreciated Kita’s dedication, but she probably would never get used to her aura.

“And to answer your question, yes. I know my limits.” Kita sighed. “But I wish my calluses would form faster! I wanna play for longer.”

“Y-you do have a little. Hope th-they aren’t ruining your pretty hands...”

Kita stopped playing.

“M-my what?”

“Hmm?” Hitori tilted her head in confusion, before realisation struck her. “A-ah! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! That sounded s-s-super creepy, didn’t i-it? Hahahaha, guess I sh-should atone, huh? It was n-nice knowing you, Kita-san. I h-hope this is an acceptable offering. My soul has g-got to be worth something, amirite? Hahahaha...”

Kita struggled to keep Hitori from stabbing herself with her guitar, even more so when she had to reassure onlookers that Hitori was fine. A couple of deep breaths and light scolding to not attempt public execution in public later, Hitori calmed down.

“I can see where you’re coming from though. Even the other girls are jealous of my hands. I take good care of them!” Kita flaunted her fingernails. “Although, with how often I practise guitar, it has been a bit hard to maintain my nails.”

“Y-yeah, th-that’s why I keep mine relatively s-short.” Hitori shakily showed her fingernails. “They don’t l-look as good as yours, sorry...”

“Aww, nonsense! Yours look cute! They suit you!”

“M-me? Aww, sh-shucks... nooooooooo... stop it y-you...” Hitori wobbled. Kita had to make sure she didn’t fall onto the floor.

“We should probably continue with our lesson.”

“A-ah, yes.”

The two continued to strum, enjoying the melodies the other produced. Hitori seemed a bit squeamish, darting her eyes around the room. Kita shouldn’t be surprised that her teacher was capable of playing so well while looking at a million other things, yet she couldn’t stop herself from being astonished. She wanted to be as good as her someday.

“S-so, how’s, umm... well, I w-was going to ask if...” Hitori hesitated, still softly playing.

“Hmm?” Kita noticed her hesitation. “You can ask me, Hitori-chan. I don’t bite.”

“Haha, yeah...” Hitori weakly laughed, muttering, “It’d be weird if you did, haha...”

“Hm?”

“Ah, nothing!” Hitori coughed into her hand. “So, h-how are y-you with your p-p-parents? Ho-hopefully well? Maybe?”

“Ah.” Kita smiled, playing along with Hitori. “You don’t have to be scared to ask something like that. We’re friends! Plus, you helped me with that situation, so I’m sure you deserve to know how it’s going.”

Hitori nodded.

“Hmm, I’d say it’s much better now. My mother is still adamant about me dropping this whole band thing, but my father is more supportive. Hehe, actually, my whole family is glad I can now do mini-performances whenever we have family gatherings!”

“Woah, r-really? I don’t think I c-can perform in front of m-my family...” Hitori shook. “Scary.”

“Aren’t they less scary than random strangers though? If you’re used to live performances in Starry, surely you can handle your own family!” Kita brightly said.

“W-well, that’s the thing. I’m n-not used to either...” Hitori shrunk. “Still not used t-to so many p-people...”

“That’s ok! Eventually, you’ll get used to it. And then you can play all the songs you want to your family. They’re real proud of you, y’know?”

“Y-yeah. I’m happy to have th-them in my life.” Hitori smiled with gratitude. “C-can you say the same with y-your family?”

“Say what?”

“That they’re p-proud of you?”

Kita slowly stopped playing to think for a moment. Were her parents proud of her being in Kessoku Band? Sure, they might be somewhat supportive and enjoy the little performances she did with the whole family; but did they actually appreciate all her work in the band? Do their hearts swell in happiness whenever Kita came home and spouted everything that happened during band practice? They haven’t even seen a single Kessoku Band live.

She wasn’t so sure.

“I... don’t know. I’ve never really asked.” Kita somberly said.

“O-oh. S-sorry...” Hitori went back to playing softly.

The quiet ringing of Hitori’s guitar filled the void. The distant noises of various vehicles echoed through the room, but never overpowering the strumming of Hitori.

I guess this is what Hitori-chan meant by serene. It is oddly quiet here.

Kita sighed. She could use more silence in her life, if she were honest. She was glad she could dim down by Hitori, even if just for a bit.

“But,” Kita spoke up, making Hitori glance at her. “like I said before, Hitori-chan. Eventually, they’ll see us, shining so bright on stage and with the whole world listening. Listening to Nijika-chan’s rhythm, Ryo-chan’s groove, my amazing singing and of course, your rocking guitar!”

Hitori giggled at Kita’s view of the future. It sounded very nice.

“I know to get there, we’re going to have to work. Get better at what we do. And I... understand the sacrifices that come along the way. To be honest, Hitori-chan, I wish my parents were like yours. Always supportive and there for you when you need them.”

“S-so, you hate y-your parents?” Hitori asked, sort of knowing where this kind of thinking leads.

“No, I could never! We have our differences, but I can never hate them. I love them! It’s just...” Kita looked away. “I wish they see the same passion I have for rock as I see it. Not as another hobby or a phase, but who I am meant to be.”

Hitori was awed by Kita’s burning desire for Kessoku Band. She could’ve sworn she saw her eyes sparkle.

“The day will come, Hitori-chan. Where they’ll see that it was all worth it. But, until then, I guess I just have to deal with... whatever.”

“M-maybe I can h-h-help?” Hitori blurted out.

Oh my goodness, did you just say what I think you just said? Did you just offer to help in a family problem? You idiot, Hitori. Stupid, stupid,

stupid! What are you supposed to do, magically wave your guitar at them and they'll change their minds? Now it's going to suck when I have to say-

"Really?" Kita beamed, making Hitori recoil. "You can help me convince them to watch one of our lives! Then, they can see all the progress we've made!"

"Th-that..."

That doesn't sound too bad. Sure, I'll have to talk with Kita-san's parents, and from what I've heard they sound strict. But it's the best I can do. Kita-san will make sure I don't die. Yep.

"S-sure. Ah, but wouldn't it b-be better for Nijika-chan to convince them? She is our leader..."

"Nope! That won't do! She may be our leader, but she doesn't know how much I've gotten better. And, you're my teacher! I'm sure they'll love to see who taught me everything I know!"

"A-ah-umm, o-ok..." Hitori mumbled.

"Don't worry, Hitori-chan. They may seem strict, but they're nice. I've already told them about you, so they'll be considerate when you meet them." Kita reassured.

"R-really?" Hitori said.

Great, and they know of how lame I am! But, I can't say no. Time to mark my calendar for death...

"Yup! They know how cool you are!"

"Eh? What did you s-say to them about m-me?"

"Oh, just about how skilled you are in guitar, your lack of friends - ah, I don't mean that in a bad way, Hitori-chan - and that you are a little

bit eccentric.” Kita said. “They can be a bit judgey, but trust me. They’re nice!”

“O-oh. That doesn’t s-sound too bad...” Hitori hummed. “L-let me know wh-when you want me, hehehe...”

“For sure. Thanks again, Hitori-chan. I feel like I’m a better person having met you. Really.”

“Ahehehehehe, s-surely you d-don’t mean that, hehehehehe...” Hitori inched closer and closer to the floor, morphing into a slipping hazard.

Kita could only smile as she watched her guitarist friend coat the floor in pink goop.

“We really need to work on how you take compliments.” Kita began to scoop up all the goop.

“Y-yes.” the goop said.

Kita looked out the window, bothered that throughout their conversation she had not seen Ryo yet on the course.

Shouldn't Ryo-chan be driving out there at this point? What's taking them so long?

MEANWHILE...

Nijika was currently banging her head on the window, thankful that her head wasn’t bleeding from the amount of times she banged her head on it for the past half hour. She had to witness Ryo walk around the car like she was on an Olympic track and field course. She could tell that Ryo had no idea what she was doing, occasionally sneaking a bit off the car to pull out her phone and search for what to actually check. It wasn’t like she could tell her instructor about it, or else they’d probably be sitting here for another two hours. So, she let it slide. Anything to end her misery of boredom.

Honestly, she would really appreciate swapping places with Kita. At least Kita can keep Ryo under control. And she tolerates her shenanigans well.

“Ok, all good.” Ryo hopped into the driver’s seat, giving a thumbs up to her instructor. Nijika groaned in relief.

“And, you made sure the side mirrors are working?” The instructor said, frustration on the tip of his tongue.

“Yep. The gas exhaust is clear too.”

“Alright, NOW we can start. Miss Yamada, please start the car.” The instructor handed Ryo the car keys.

“Yes sir.”

Ryo began to fiddle with the keys, forgetting how to actually start a car. Knowing that she would take a while, the instructor turned to Nijika.

“I apologise for how lengthy this is, miss Ijichi. Miss Yamada is a very slow learner.”

“I feel like I should be apologising to you for bringing her here. W-with all due respect, sir.” Nijika slightly bowed.

“Oh, nonsense! I’m used to teaching slow learners.” The instructor said, before whispering, “Though, Miss Yamada does take the cake for being the slowest.”

“Heh, that sounds about right.” Nijika snickered. “Thank you. I look forward to seeing Ryo finally be able to drive. Then our band can start playing in more places.”

“Oh, you two are in a band?”

“Yes! Kessoku Band. We’re a relatively small rock band, but please do come by the live house Starry to see us perform. We don’t

actually have an upcoming live scheduled, but we should be playing again soon!" Nijika said, thankful that sitting in the car for about an hour was kind of worth the wait. Kind of.

"I see. Well, when I find the time, I will check you guys out. I'm not so into rock, but I am looking forward to seeing you guys perform." The instructor said.

"That's great to hear! Here, have a ticket!" Nijika pulled out a Starry performance ticket. "It has the address to Starry as well."

"O-oh? Thank you." The instructor slightly bowed.

Suddenly, the car began to vibrate to life.

"Bingo. Told you, Nijika. I can turn on any car just fine without help." Ryo gloated, looking back to smirk at Nijika.

"One, never say that again. It sounds wrong." Nijika shook her head. "Second, you took way too long to do it."

"She's right, Miss Yamada. Though, since this is your second time, I will excuse it." The instructor scribbled on his clipboard.

"R-right. Sorry."

"Alright. Now, we can start our lesson proper."

"Meow!"

Will Nijika be able to endure such hardships? And how about Kita, when will she ask Hitori out (to convince her parents that Kessoku Band isn't just a hobby)? Will Ryo pass her driving lesson? Will Nijicat have a major role? Find out in the second part of Chapter 8!

Insert "yeah this was supposed to be just one chapter, but then I cooked too hard so I'm splitting it into parts even though I said parts are cringe" here. I don't know what else to say.

I appreciate all the comments and stuff. Glad to see y'all enjoying Kessoku Band goof around.

Ryo becoming squishy fr fr. It was fun writing that 'Shadow the Hedgehog' segment. Not too farfetched that Nijika knows about Shadow. Like, I don't know. It sounds goofy enough to be not surprising.

I already have an idea for the next chapter, so maybe don't expect a dry spout. Maybe. Don't hold my word for it.

Next part whenever!

Chapter 8 (part 2)

Chapter 14: Chapter 8 (part 2)

Ryo steps on the gas. And everyone (minus Nijicat) fears for their lives.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

In the empty home of the Yamadas was Ryo's mother, currently playing on their family grand piano. It was something that was passed down by her mother-in-law, a relic of the Yamadas. Funnily, Ryo's father never played it, having never learned how to play the piano. Ryo's mother chuckled at the thought: a family relic, yet he can't even play the darn thing.

She played through songs that she was taught when she was young. Although she didn't have time to play to her heart's content, her piano skills never got rusty as she found time to play in-between break days, though she never deviated from playing the songs she knew. It was a little saddening, knowing that she was too busy to play the piano. She was glad that her daughter was pursuing something she loved doing, especially since it was something music related. Sure, the bass was no violin or flute, but it was an instrument.

She was also impressed with Ryo's work on Kessoku Band. She knew that her daughter was in a band previously, but left due to conflicting views. So, to see her in another band made by her best friend and see it flourish was amazing. In particular, it was endearing to see her make original music through the band. The amount of times Ryo's mother would accidentally disturb the creative process of Ryo in her room was too many to count.

Ryo always loved her time alone. Even as a little kid, Ryo's mother could tell that she'd be more introverted. Though she felt bad that she couldn't spend as much time with Ryo as she wanted (Young Ryo kept calling her "a clingy koala", which was rude but she got the point), she knew to give her daughter space when she needed it. Her deadpanned attitude didn't help either, hard to tell whether or not Ryo was being serious. She wasn't very sure where she got her monotonic attitude. Maybe from her father, with how Ryo finds him funnier than her.

However, one thing that Ryo's mother knew very well was that Ryo loved her and her father. She had funny ways of showing that love, as Ryo's mother relived past memories of the awkward confessions Ryo made and cringe songs she sang instead of outright saying how she felt. Of course, now Ryo knew better and was a little bit more honest with them, even going so far as hugging them goodbye before she left for school. Her father couldn't stop crying when she did that the first time. Perhaps it was because of that cat she took care of. Looking back, Ryo's mother noticed that Ryo got more affectionate only recently.

Wherever that cat is, thank you. I get to hug my daughter more often now!

A bit selfish to think, but you can't really blame her.

Ending the song, the notes reverberated across the room. When they were building their house, she distinctly remembered asking the living room to be quite spacious, so that the piano had space to sing. And singing did the piano do, harmoniously ringing through the space. Young Ryo loved listening to her playing, always falling asleep to the lullabies she played. She sang a bit too, as she couldn't help doing it while watching her Ryo listen with glee.

She knew Ryo got her vocal chords from her, not from her father.

Ryo's mother got up to stretch after her 'performance' when she remembered that Ryo had her driving lessons today.

She felt a chill go down her spine.

Weird, considering their aircon was off. Maybe she was sitting for too long? She was a bit older than she wanted to admit.

Hmm...

She scrambled to her phone to call her husband.

“Hello, honey? I told you to call me only for em-”

“Sorry, sweetheart, but I just got a bad feeling about leaving Ryo alone.” Ryo’s mother said, slightly shaking.

“What? She has Ijichi’s sister with her, she’ll be fine.” Her husband reassured. Distant writing could be heard through the phone.

“I know that, but... I can’t shake off this feeling of dread?”

Ryo’s father sighed.

“Fine. I’ll drive over there to check. It’s nearby anyways.”

“Thanks sweetheart~” Ryo’s mother cooed. “Oh, and take the ambulance there too. You’ll get there faster!”

“H-huh?” Ryo’s father squawked, a skid being heard right after. “The hospital isn’t going to like me taking one of them just to check on our daughter, honey.”

“Just in case, y’know...”

Ryo’s father sighed harder.

“Yeah, I know how Ryo’s first lesson went. Thank goodness Ijichi’s sister is so sweet.”

“Thanks. I’ll leave you to it!”

“Right. Love you, honey.”

“Love you too~”

Putting down her phone, Ryo’s mother sighed a breath she didn’t know she was holding in. She felt relieved.

I do hope our Ryo is fine...

“Miss Yamada, please take note of the-woah! The speed limit!” Her instructor frantically said, holding onto the dashboard for dear life.

“Noted.” Ryo responded, proceeding to completely ignore the pleas of her instructor.

To say that Ryo’s driving lesson was going swimmingly would be wrong. Completely. It was more like it was drowning in the kiddie pool while wearing a floatie vest.

Already, Ryo has made mistakes. Not counting her pre-checkup of the vehicle, she: stepped on the gas while the car was in parking mode; stepped on the gas while the car’s handbrake was on; forgot to shift to driving mode and nearly rammed the car into a nearby wall while she was in reverse mode. To be fair, she has not broken any property on the driving course. The instructor’s manager will be relieved to hear that, though that may change shortly.

Currently, Ryo was rushing through the whole course, drifting and sliding through the roads. She pulled off moves that even she didn’t know she could do, which was only feeding her ego more. Her driving was flawless, if one were to ignore the small patches of dirt made by her multiple skiddings off the road. Her parents would be proud.

“And please, Miss Yamada, we could turn down the music!” Her instructor pleaded.

“It helps me focus. Ask Nijika.” Ryo could barely be heard over ‘Gas Gas Gas’ playing in the background.

The instructor looked behind to check up on the blonde, surprised that she was holding on well. Well enough. Nijika had her body hunched over, one arm wrapped around Nijicat while her other leaning onto the instructor’s chair. She was holding onto both the chair and cat for dear life, keeping the feline safe in her arm. Her fury on the Yamadas’ daughter was replaced with dire fear. She knew that Ryo was bad at driving, but she didn’t expect her to be this bad. She was glad to have brought her knee guards, but wished she brought her helmet.

“Miss Ijichi, I am so-woah! So sorry. It seems that Miss Yamada is-remember to slow down as you approach the bends, Miss Yamada!” The instructor shouted over the music. “**ahem** Anyways, Miss Yamada is quite enthusiastic today.”

“H-h-hehehaah, y-yeah...” Nijika stammered, flashbacking to when she inspired Ryo.

“You’re not doing this just for you. Think of the future, Ryo.”

Oh, what a fool she had been to motivate Ryo.

“Is your... cat going to be fine? I can ask Miss Yamada to-”

“No, no, no! We’ll be, err, fine? We should see this through. I know more than anyone to not disturb Ryo when she sets her mind on something.” Nijika said, muttering, “Even if that something includes endangering our lives.”

“I see.” The instructor shakily took down notes, being careful while the car continued to jostle.

“Nijika. You see these sick drifts I’m pulling off? Can’t believe you doubted me.” Ryo yelled, comically twisting the steering wheel.

“Y-yeah... m-me too...” Nijika said, too focused on surviving.

You're gonna live, you're gonna live, you're gonna live. And then you can punch Ryo in the gut. Or, I don't know, have some lemonade. You're gonna live...

Nijika looked down to check on Nijicat, surprised to see the cat slumbering in her arm. She would find it cute, were they not in the same car as Ryo.

Ryo continued down the course, barely keeping the vehicle on the road as she drove at a blistering pace.

Hope the others are seeing my awesome driving skills. Wouldn't want them to go to waste.

MEANWHILE...

“Really? You don't do anything else, besides wash your hair?”

“Y-yeah? Sh-should I be doing more?”

After practising for a while and with nothing else to do, the two guitarists talked. Kita was currently awed at Hitori's hair, with the pinkhead slightly confused.

“So: no salon visits, no conditioner or anything else when you shower and no other hair treatments? That's all natural?” Kita listed off. “And no dandruff too?”

“Y-yes.” Hitori meekly responded. “I-is that bad?”

“No! Not at all. It's just...” Kita twiddled with her guitar pick. “I'm kind of jealous. You must have good genetics.”

“R-really?” Hitori asked, more confused if what Kita said was a compliment or not.

“Yeah! I know some girls would do anything to have such long, smooth and soft hair like yours!”

“B-b-but I don’t even comb it r-right. I just ready my-myself until I look p-presentable...”

Kita gawked at Hitori.

“I want to be your sister.”

“What?!?”

“W-well, you’ve got good g-genes and s-stuff. And y-you’re naturally cute. Like, for r-real. And...” Kita continued to stutter, though it got tuned out by Hitori.

If Kita-san becomes my sister, then Futari will like her more than me! Even more so, now that she’ll have to live with us. And then, my family ranking will go down! I’ll be forgotten in my own family!

“Hahahah, ahahaha!” Hitori awkwardly laughed, stopping Kita’s rambling. “S-sorry, Kita-san! We a-aren’t looking for another s-sister at the moment. Our family is g-good with two sisters. Yup! No n-need for a third one!”

Kita raised an eyebrow, before smirking.

“You’re just jealous that I’d take Futari-chan away from you, huh?”

“H-huh?!” Hitori touched her head, in case there was some telepathic device on her head. “N-nonsense! I would n-never be j-j-j...*sigh*”

Kita patted the deflated Hitori.

“Don’t worry, I’m not taking her away, nor will I leave my own family.” Kita reassured, though a hint of sadness was buried underneath her words.

Hitori picked up on Kita's tone, inflating immediately to ask, "A-are you lonely at h-home?"

"What makes you say that, Hitori-chan?"

"W-well, aren't you an o-only child? I never h-heard you talk about a b-brother or s-sister."

"That's kind of judgemental, Hitori-chan."

"Ah, I'm sorry! Sorry! So-" Hitori knelt on the ground.

"Geez, I was joking! Calm down." Kita propped Hitori back onto her seat. Kita always found it cute that Hitori usually let her friends bring her back to reality, with very minimal opposition. Like a pet would trust its owner.

"But yes. I am an only child."

Hitori turned to Kita.

"It must be nice having siblings. I know Ryo-chan is also an only child, but she likes being alone. I'm the complete opposite, so y'know."

"Think of t-the benefits, Kita-san. You don't have to sh-share anything, you get s-spoilt since you're the only child, you don't have to s-stress over taking care of a younger s-sibling..." Hitori kept on going, eliciting a disturbed look on Kita's face.

She didn't think she'd have a list ready. A list that long too.

"... and yeah. But! But d-don't worry. I l-l-love my little s-sister. Even though she's a g-gremlin..."

"I don't doubt your love for your sister, Hitori-chan. I guess what I'm saying is..." Kita sighed. "that it gets lonely at home. Real lonely."

Though this was out of Hitori's 'relatability' scale, she tilted her head, prompting Kita to continue.

"Right, you like being alone sometimes, hmm?" Kita seemingly read Hitori's mind, to which she nodded. "Not saying I don't like my alone time too! I think everyone needs their alone time."

Hitori smiled at the redhead. Even with their polar opposite personalities, there's still some things that both of them can agree on.

"But, that's why I go out all the time. Hang out with friends and all that. Because nobody's at home. Both my parents work long hours, so they aren't home until late at night."

"Isn't t-that tiring?" Hitori asked.

"Going out? Not at all?"

"A-ah, right." Hitori frowned for a second.

Right. Polar opposites.

"*sigh*, but it must be nice having a sister or a brother. Coming home to hang out and just relax with your sibling. Bonding together, talking about your days with each other, maybe even pulling some pranks. Hehe!" Kita imagined, though that last part sent bad memories of Hitori's experiences with a younger Futari. She had to shake them away, not wanting the many times she had been embarrassed in front of her parents because of the little pinkhead.

"When I was younger, I'd play with my parents all the time! Mostly with my dad, since Mom was the one who worked for the family. I guess that's still part of me to this day."

Kita sighed.

"I dunno, I just want someone to hang out with, even at home! But, I don't not like my family. I actually really enjoy the time when my

cousins do come home. I wish they would stay forever.”

It seems Kita-san has put some thought into this. Does she really want a sibling that bad? Does... she want to be my sister?

“Of course!” Kita immediately responded. “W-well, like in an alternate universe or something like that.”

Ah. I said that last part out loud.

“Hitori-chan, don’t shrink out of existence. I know you probably weren’t supposed to say that out loud.” Kita said, bringing back Hitori from the shadow realm. Or something. Nobody’s really sure where the pinkhead goes.

“S-so why did you answer i-it?”

Kita’s face bursts with red, as she turns away. She grasps at straws, finding an excuse or any valid reason but the obvious one to say to Hitori. The pinkhead watches as her master of socialising stumbles and fumbles, until ultimately she mutters, “Because I like hanging out with you...”

No matter how many times Kita mentions her enjoyment of Hitori’s company, it never fails to turn the guitarist into pink mush.

“M-m-me? Surely y-you don’t meaaaaan that, right? Hahahahah, hahahaa...” Hitori brushed off.

“I really do mean it.”

“Oh, g-gosh. Hehehehe, eheheheh...”

Kita sighed at the pink slime in front of her struggle to keep itself together. This was probably a part of Hitori that will never go away, even as she gets older. Not that Kita minded that.

“Oh hey, it’s Ryo-chan!” Kita pointed out the window.

Hitori snapped back to normal and looked out, finding Ryo's car going down the track.

"F-finally..." Hitori joined Kita near the window. "I c-can hear... music?"

"And, is that her singing?" Kita asked.

Both guitarists began to witness Ryo's totally amazing driving skills, flinging dirt onto the road as she skidded past. They were able to hear her singing whatever song she was playing in the car, lost in the melody. They caught a glimpse of Nijika at the backseat, fearing for her life. Same goes for the instructor they saw.

"Th-they'll be fine. R-r-right?" Hitori asked, turning to Kita for reassurance.

"I... have no idea."

They're totally screwed.

"Put these on." Kita handed Hitori a pair of knee guards.

"H-huh? W-w-what for?"

"In case something happens!"

Ryo slammed on the brakes, putting the car to a screeching halt.

"Haah, s-so..." Ryo breathed out, having put everything she's got into driving. "H-how was that?"

I'm alive. Haha, I'm alive. I'm alive!

Nijika crumpled onto the seat, finally able to stop gripping the seat so hard. She felt something soft land on her head, looking up to see Nijicat. She was glad that the feline was safe. She'll have words with

Ryo later. After a nap. And maybe some therapy. She missed her stuffed toys.

“W-well.” The instructor brushed his hair, taking a look at his clipboard of messily written notes. “You ignored every sign on the course, nearly rammed the vehicle into a wall, caused minor property damage and perhaps even damaged the engine of this car!”

He pointed to the hood of the car, which had started to emit some smoke.

“Guess the car couldn’t handle my sick drifts.” Ryo said.

“Sure. And, Miss Yamada, we were supposed to practise on your parallel parking today!”

Ryo scanned around until she saw where they were supposed to be: a curbside with two mock cars parked by it, with a space in the middle.

“Oh.”

The instructor pinched the bridge of his nose.

“But. You did keep us alive. Somehow. And you did run through the course pretty well. Considering this is your second day.”

“So, do I pass?” Ryo asked.

“No. We will practise your parallel parking next week.”

“Aww.”

“Miss Yamada, I’m sorry to be a bit blunt, but I cannot allow you to move on with the other lessons after what I’ve seen today.” The instructor stated. “You could’ve gotten us killed! And especially with your friend and cat with us?”

Ryo looked to the shell-shocked Nijika, taking a much needed nap. Nijicat perked up upon seeing Ryo, greeting her with a meow. Ryo shot it a small smile, before it turned into a small frown.

“You’re... you’re right. I really screwed up. I thought I could get away with natural talent, or something like that. Sorry.” Ryo bowed.

“It’s... fine. People come here to learn how to drive, right? What kind of instructor would I be if I stopped teaching you?” The instructor said.

“But why? Why go to these lengths for me? You’ve seen my driving last lesson.”

“Y-yes, I am aware of your... inability. But, like I said, what kind of instructor would I be if we didn’t see this through?”

The instructor looked back to Nijika.

“Your friend here told me that you both are in a band, yes?”

“Mhm.”

“Having someone to drive you guys to far venues would really help. I can see that you’re dedicated to helping your band. Even if that dedication nearly got us killed.” The instructor cleared his throat.

“Anyways, there’s no student that cannot be taught. We have a lot to work on, and I mean a lot.”

“Yes, sir. Apologies.”

“Stop apologising, Miss Yamada. You make me look bad.” The instructor lightly slapped Ryo on the shoulder. “Oh, and please. Don’t bring your cat or your friend next time, especially when you are aware of your lack of driving skills.”

“Yes, sir.” Ryo said, adding, “I can call my parents to pay for all this.”

“No need, no need. Thankfully, you didn’t do any major damage, so a cleanup is all that is needed. Besides, you’re still young. I don’t think your parents will be happy to hear about this, so let’s keep this to ourselves, ok?”

“Oh. But they expect me to do damage. They probably have some cash ready for something like this.”

“Huh?” The instructor waited for Ryo’s answer, but it never came. “Then I guess I will consult with your parents about this another time.”

The instructor sighed. He was going to get some flak from the higher-ups for allowing Ryo to continue to learn how to drive here, even more so that the bassist was technically being let off the hook for all the damages. But it was going to be worth it. Maybe.

At least the damages will be paid for.

“Alright, you may go. Remember to check that the car is off.” The instructor clicked his pen, getting out of the car. “Oh, and do wake up your friend. I’ll be off to submit your evaluation form.”

“Gotcha. Thanks for everything.” Ryo made sure the car was off before turning to Nijika. She nudged her.

“*yawn*, mmm, a-are we finished? Can I get o-off now? Please?” Nijika immediately asked, visibly still shaken.

“Yes, Nijika. We’re done.” Ryo replied, taking Nijicat off her shoulder.

“Finally!” Nijika bolted out of the car, rolling around in the nearby grass. “Hahaha, solid ground! Oh, how I missed you!”

“Umm, Nijika? I need some help.”

“Ugh, what now? Don’t tell me I have to sit through that again. Pleh.” Nijika spat, having accidentally eaten some grass. She didn’t understand how Ryo could eat that stuff. Regularly too.

"I can't move."

"What?" Nijika rushed over to find Ryo still sitting in the driver's seat.
"You're fine."

"I..." Ryo scratched her cheek. "I might've sprained my ankle."

"From hitting the brakes."

"Yes, from hitting the brakes."

Nijika groaned, before pulling Ryo up and letting her lean on her shoulder. Both girls awkwardly shuffled to the lobby, with Nijicat hopping off Ryo and scurrying somewhere. Though Ryo really wanted Nijicat by her side, she knew that that cat will be fine.

"Sorry if I wobble a bit, I did nearly die today." Nijika half-joked, half-stated.

"..."

"Ryo?"

"... sorry." Ryo whispered.

Nijika glanced to see Ryo hiding her head in shame.

"I'd say it's ok, buuuut it really isn't. I don't think I can ever get in a car again." Nijika sighed. "But, at the very least, I'm glad to see you dedicated to the band."

"... you're too kind. Thank you."

"Yeah, I know I am, you insufferable idiot."

A shared silence as they continued to limp back to the lobby.

"Nijicat's ok, right? I don't think I can keep on living if Nijicat got hurt."

“You know, you never told me what song we should pick for your funeral. Might want to pick one fast if you keep speaking.”

That shutted the bassist up.

“But yes, your cat is fine. Thanks to me.”

“I am in your debt, Nijika.”

“Oh, shut it you.”

“I’m being serious right now, Nijika. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“I can still punch you in the gut, you know.”

“ ... ”

“That’s what I thought.”

Ryo’s father pulled up just outside of the driving school, fumbling to lock the ambulance’s door. He just got a call from Ryo’s instructor about what had happened, thankful that she didn’t get any major injuries. Didn’t stop him from running several red lights. He felt like it was justified to use the ambulance siren. For her daughter.

Meanwhile, Kita and Hitori met up with Ryo and Nijika. Immediately Nijika detached from Ryo as she slumped on a nearby seat, prompting Hitori to check over her. Kita replaced Nijika’s duty, asking a multitude of questions. Though Ryo nearly tuned it to white noise (mostly because Kita asked obvious questions, something that Ryo definitely should not tell her), she answered all her inquiries with small grunts and hums.

“So, just a sprained ankle? It’s not twisted or anything?” Kita asked.

“Kita, for the third time, I’m fine. Yes, just sprained.” Ryo stated.

“Please, don’t turn my sprained ankle into a twisted one.”

“Ryo-chan! Why would I do that?”

“I dunno. Sounds like something you’d do.”

“Ugh, you-” Kita nearly slapped Ryo, before turning that aggression to herself. “-owchie. I’m not that mean!”

“Yeah, you are. Big meanie.”

“No, I am not!”

“Nuh uh.”

While the two bickered, Hitori attempted to console the shaken drummer.

“W-was it th-that bad?” Hitori asked, awkwardly stroking Nijika’s arm.

“Yes. She just wouldn’t stop. She kept on going, and going, and going. I thought I’d be in that car forever, Bocchi-chan. My eternal purgatory, stuck to suffer. And for what? Why was I to suffer? Was it something I’ve done? Did I wrong some higher being, and thus been subjected to torture? Please, Bocchi-chan. I need an answer.” Nijika said, eyes pleading for something.

“U-u-umm, ah-ehh... are you s-sure you guys j-just had a dr-driving lesson?” Hitori asked, irked by Nijika’s words.

“Yes!”

“O-o-ok. H-here.” Hitori sat by her and patted her head. “Th-there, there...”

“Mmmm...” Nijika nuzzled to the touch. “Can you do that forever?”

“Wh-what? A-ah, I m-mean, sure! You can c-count on me! Heheh, ehehehe...”

“Ryo! Are you okay?” a voice rang through the lobby.

All the girls turned to see Ryo's father, panting hard. Immediately, he scooped up her daughter, hugging her tight.

"Oh my goodness, I am so glad you're okay! Hahaha, my Ryo!" Ryo's father said.

"Urk! I'm... about... to... not be... if you... crush my w-windpipe!" Ryo croaked, squirming in her father's arms.

Kita's eyes dazzled, being able to see a side of Ryo she doesn't see often. She had to fight the urge not to take a photo - it'd be rude! Hitori looked even more irked, seeing their cool bassist hugging someone. It reminded her of their awkward hug, making Hitori have to purge the memory out of her head yet again.

"Yeah, Ryo's parents really shower her with affection." Nijika sighed. "It's kinda cute. Except if the person who received all that love didn't really deserve it. And that person was named Ryo Yamada."

"A-ah, I see..." Hitori reluctantly replied.

What am I supposed to say to that? "Oh, I relate, because I feel the same way." - that's too depressing. Honest, but Nijika-chan doesn't want to hear that! At all! "Maybe you're just jealous." - no! Then I'd get my ankle sprained from Nijika-chan! She's violent! "The hypotenuse is the long side of the triangle." - now how would that make things better???

"Oh, I'm not jealous or anything, if you were thinking that Bocchi-chan." Nijika waved off. "It's just a bit polarising, seeing her parents and her. Like they don't match."

"Y-yeah. I get w-what you mean."

"I didn't say those headpats can stop~"

I hate to take advantage of Bocchi-chan, but I can't help it. I need this. She's surprisingly good at headpats.

“Ah, y-y-yes ma’am Ijichi-sama!”

“... let... go...” Ryo continued to squirm. “... my friends...”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry! Sorry!” Ryo’s father let go of his bear hug on his daughter, but kept one arm on her shoulder. “I could’ve made your ankle worse!”

“Y-yeah, that.” Ryo coughed, trying to keep her face in its normal shade. “So, why’d you bring the ambulance? It’s just a sprain.”

“Oh, that was your mother’s idea.” Ryo’s father laughed. “You know her. Always paranoid. Though this time, she was kind of right.”

“Sorta like when she married you.”

“Ryo-chan! That’s your own-”

“Ahahahahahaha! Good one, Ryo!” Ryo’s dad chortled, confusing Kita. “Even while you’re down, you’re not out huh?”

“Heh. Of course. Competition’s rough.” Ryo slapped her father’s shoulder.

“Oh geez, Ryo! You could’ve told me that your friends were here.” Ryo’s father said, noticing Kita’s distress.

“But I did-”

“I’m so sorry! It’s just banter among our family. I don’t think I got your name?”

“Kita! And no worries! I do find you two cute!” Kita beamed.

“K-Kita...” Ryo mumbled.

“Thank you so much for watching over my daughter.” Ryo’s father bowed.

“Oh, please, don’t thank me. Thank Nijika-chan!” Kita pointed towards their drummer, who was at this point rubbing her head on Hitori’s hand. Said guitarist was frozen, internally debating whether she should suggest they’d leave or continue to comfort Nijika. “Umm, maybe another time? Ryo-chan’s driving was a bit, well...”

“Of course, I understand. I’m sorry for all the trouble caused.”

“You should probably be saying that to me, Sir Yamada.” Ryo’s instructor came out to the lobby.

“Ah! Thank you for being willing to teach my daughter. I know that she can be a real handful.” Ryo’s father bowed.

“Dad, I’m right here.” Ryo butted in, awkwardly waiting at the side.

“I am aware of that, Sir Yamada, but anyone can be taught. With enough practice.” The instructor smiled. “With all due respect, it reminds me of when your wife learnt how to drive here. Quite similar to Miss Yamada here, minus all the chaos.”

“Hah. I can never remind her of all that. She’s always been a bit of a slow learner.” Ryo’s father shook his head. “Anyways, we should probably get going. I’m sure Ryo here has told you about paying for any of the damages she’s caused?”

“Yes, she did. Please, do attend to your daughter’s needs. You can always send the payment through online means.” Ryo’s instructor suggested.

“Right, right! Well, we better be off. Thank you again for your help. And, thank you Kita-san for being with Ryo today.”

“Just doing my job, Sir Yamada. Take care.” The instructor walked off.

“My pleasure! Stay safe you two!” Kita waved.

“Bye Kita. Bye Bocchi. Bye Nijika.” Ryo said to each, before crawling into the front seat of the ambulance. “Y’know Dad, once I get my licence, maybe I could help out with-”

“I, uhh, don’t think the hospital would like that. You’d be saving more lives if you didn’t drive one of these.” Ryo’s father replied, driving off.

Kita watched as the ambulance slowly left her vision. After they left her peripheral vision, she squealed.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAA, Ryo-chan’s soooooooo cute with her father! I gotta convince her to hang out with her and her father! That’d be a blast! A little awkward, but fun!

Turning back, she found the duo still seated, Nijika having fallen asleep in Hitori’s arms. The pinkhead was kicked into overdrive, having to deal with so much physical intimacy in a short amount of time.

“I’ll take Nijika-chan off your hands, Hitori-chan.” Kita carefully lifted Nijika off the guitarist, keeping her by her side. “Let’s go take her home?”

“A-ah, yes.” Hitori nodded. “W-wait. C-can I?”

“Yes, Hitori-chan. You can deflate. Don’t take too long though!”

“Th-thanks.” Hitori bowed, before lying onto the seat. “Ahh...”

Kita had to jolt Hitori back up when the staff thought that someone spilled their pink drink all over the seat.

Seika sat at the dinner table, idly scrolling through her phone. Most of the bands that reserved a spot for tonight suddenly cancelled, resulting in Starry closing earlier than usual. While it was a bummer, there wasn’t much she could do. Saves money too.

PA-san suggested keeping her company, since she would be alone at her apartment. Seika passed on that offer, not wanting to hear all about her potted plant.

I swear, she takes care of that thing better than herself sometimes...

So, here she sat. Still scrolling through her phone, something she picked up from the sound engineer of Starry. She wasn't even looking at her screen, yet she still scrolled. Seika didn't really know what to do with her free time, mostly because she rarely got any. Work at Starry consumed most of her day, and while she didn't mind losing herself in work (especially since she doesn't do much, something she will never admit to anyone), it made her stumped as to how to spend her free time if she got any. Usually she'd go pester her sister until they played a game on her Bintendo Smitch or watch a movie on their TV. But, she wasn't here.

It's getting late. She should be here by-

As if on cue, the doorbell rang. She could hear the muffled sounds of Kita and Nijika. Seika hopped off her seat to greet them.

"... thanks guys for escorting me back home." Nijika could be heard through the door.

"No problem! It was getting late anyways." Kita's aura could be felt through the door.

Little mumblings sounded right after. Seika guessed it was Hitori.

"Hey girls. How was-" Seika couldn't finish her sentence as her little sister slugged her right in the stomach. "Urk!"

Her legs wobbled and she clutched her stomach, but she didn't flop onto the floor. She's had worse. This was really close to being the worst though.

"Nijika-chan!" Both guitarists yelled.

“Sorry, had to get that out of my system.” Nijika apologised, hugging her sister.

“... glad to see you too Niji. Ow.” Seika reluctantly reciprocated the hug. “Did you have to - ow, not there Niji. Did you have to punch me that hard?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Ryo was that bad?” Seika sighed.

“Y-yeah.”

“C’mere you.” Seika picked Nijika up as they crashed onto the couch to cuddle. The guitarists were left in shock.

I never knew Nijika-chan could be so violent.

Violence really does run in their family. Scary...

“So, do we...” Kita started.

“Y-yeah. We should l-leave.” Hitori turned to walk away. “We’re going t-to be in the way of their sisterly bonding.”

“Oh, ok. Ah, good night both of you! I’ll just... close the door, hehe.” Kita shouted, creaking the door shut.

Kita caught up with Hitori, sliding into the elevator as it closed.

“Where do you think you’re going, hmm?”

“Ah-eh, uhhh, h-home?” Hitori said. “W-where else?”

“Y’know, I think we could have some of our own sisterly bonding. As guitar sisters!”

“B-b-b-but we aren’t sisters!”

“Not yet we aren’t.”

“H-huh?!?”

Kita had to make sure Hitori didn't accidentally crash the elevator.

Ryo do be drifting HARD. At least in her own eyes.

Ryo's parents are here! Ryo had to get her sense of humor somewhere.

Kita trying to any% speedrun to become Bocchi's sister. Who wouldn't want the pinkhead as a sister?

Next chapter coming out whenever!

(finals are coming up for me, so had to get this out quick)

Chapter 9 (part 1)

Chapter 15: Chapter 9 (part 1)

Kita and Nijika go for a run. Meanwhile, Ryo and Hitori explore.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Another day of Starry being empty and another day of doing nothing, the girls sat in Starry. Kita cleared her schedule of potential hangouts with her other friends, thinking that they'd spend their free time - if they got any today - practising. Ryo didn't have her next set of driving lessons until next month, so she sat with the other girls, considering that she was too lazy to go anywhere after travelling to get here. Her sprained ankle made it too much of a hassle too, which although she can get to places fine with her crutches, her laziness expounded with her new-found injury. Hitori obviously hadn't had anything planned, also joining the girls in Starry. She liked going along with the others anyways, both because of her nature and that she could not think of anything fun to do for the life of her. And Nijika felt like they've been practising too much recently, so she announced that their sudden free time would actually be free time.

Everyone was on their own devices: Kita scrolling through her phone, giggling when she came across something cute; Ryo was doing the same on her phone, lightly exhaling when she saw something funny; Hitori was swaying her body to the non-existent metronome of life, or shaking from the fact that they were doing literally nothing; and Nijika was getting everyone drinks, too used to doing something to be sitting still.

"Oh yeah!" Kita said, prompting everyone to turn to her. "Me and Nijika-chan have something planned today!"

“Do we?” Nijika asked, placing their drinks on the table.

“Mhmm! You promised me that we’d go jogging one day!”

“No, I did not.”

“I dunno, Nijika.” Ryo slurped loudly on her drink. “I do recall you promising to her that.”

She shot a wink at Kita.

“How would you know? You weren’t even there!”

“Or, **slurp**, was I?”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Or, **slurp**, does it?”

“A-a-actually.” Hitori spoke up. “I did want to g-go somewhere with Ryo-san. Ah! If i-it’s ok with you all. I don’t mean to s-split us up like th-this.”

“You’re fine, Bocchi.” Ryo said. “And yeah. That sounds fun.”

“E-even with your ankle?”

“That’s where you come in.”

“Aww, you suuure you don’t want to join both of us on our jog?” Nijika asked. “You two could really use the muscle. No offence.”

Hitori and Ryo stared at the blonde, the bassist looking at her casted leg, then back at Nijika.

“You just want us to suffer with you.” Ryo stated, taking another long slurp on her drink. “Also, I think you’re forgetting this.”

Ryo pointed at her sprained ankle.

“Yeah. Sorry.” Nijika admitted. “It’s just that I reaaaaally don’t wanna go!”

“Hey! It isn’t suffering without a purpose! I’m going to get you in shape.” Kita exclaimed.

“But I am in shape! See?” Nijika stood up and gestured to herself.

“Better shape then! There’s no turning back from this, Nijika-chan! You’re already standing, see?”

Nijika hung her head, accepting her fate. “Woo. Can’t wait.”

“A-and I actually might melt on the s-sidewalk...” Hitori muttered. “I can’t go down the d-drains!”

“Mmm. Then you’ll mix with the sewage stinky water.” Ryo said.
“Yuck.”

“Eww! Don’t mention that so freely!” Kita shouted.

“Icky yucky stinky filthy toilet water. Yummy.” Ryo rubbed her belly, taking a swig of her drink, disappointed to find her cup empty.

“Geez Ryo, not while we’re drinking.” Nijika groaned.

“Garbage poopy mushy chunky-oww, ok. I’ll stop. Pfft.” Ryo suppressed a cackle, rubbing her ear after Nijika pinched it.

“Honestly, I don’t get you sometimes.”

“You shouldn’t. I’m a one-of-a-kind.”

“Sadly.”

“Hey. Wait isn’t that a good th-”

“Wait, how are you going to...” Nijika began and turned to Kita, surprised to see her already in the bathroom changing. When Kita

came out in her running clothes, she asked, "... why do you have that in your bag?"

"In case I feel like I want to go for a run!" Kita said, striking a pose. "See? My uniform fits perfectly in here!"

"Riiiiiight. I'll head up to get my running clothes. Meet outside of Starry in 10 minutes?"

"Sure!"

Hitori watched as the blonde said farewell to her sister, who seemed to be slightly pouting that Nijika and the rest could freely just go out whenever, unshackled by the responsibilities of life.

"W-woah. Those two h-have such good planning. I c-could never organise a hangout or s-something on the sp-spot." Hitori said.

"Yeah, well." Ryo turned to Hitori. "We can do better. Let's go?"

"A-ah, ok."

...

"Bocchi. You have to help me walk."

"O-oh, right."

"Ryo-chan, then why did you say 'let's go'?" Kita asked.

"I was trying to say your name, Kita. Or should I say, Ikuyo." Ryo replied. "Thanks Bocchi."

"Riiight. Take care, you two! Have fun doing... whatever you two are going to do!" Kita waved the introverts off as Hitori helped Ryo shuffle up the steps. Kita continued to stare at the door as they left.

"They'll be fine, Kita-chan." Seika said, typing away on her laptop as usual. "Bocchi-chan can keep that blue menace in check."

“U-umm, I was more worried for Hitori-chan. Not doubting that she can handle herself, just...” Kita trailed off.

“Even though Ryo's the one with the leg injury?” Seika's eyebrow raised a tad bit higher.

“W-w-well, yeah! Can't forget about t-the leg injury, right? Hahaha. It's m-more like an ankle injury, but s-same same.”

“Kita-chan, you're stuttering like Bocchi-chan~” PA-san commented.

“W-what, me? Pssh, no. Maybe s-she's rubbing off me a little bit, b-but...” Now Kita's face was covered in scarlet.

“Oh? Do I sense some jealousy?” Seika jokingly asked. “You still can join them, just message Niji about the change of-”

“No! No, no need Manager. Haha. I still want to jog with Nijika-chan.” Kita twiddled with her hair.

“Good. That girl needs more muscle on her bones.” Seika glanced at Kita. “Kinda like you.”

“M-me?”

“Yup.” PA-san joined in. “You're pretty skinny for someone so young, Kita-chan. You should try to eat more.”

“A-ah. Thanks, you two. My family has a high metabolism, so no matter how much I eat, I end up still skinny. My parents always cook so much food for me, and I'm used to eating big meals.”

“Really now?” PA-san said. “Never would've guessed.”

“I know right? My metabolism is one of the reasons why I started running in addition to the other sports I play.”

“Ahh.” Both women responded, neither of them active outside of their work.

“Alright then, you better be off.” Seika waved at Kita. “Niji might be scampering off if you don’t.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t. She’ll look completely different when you meet her later. Bye Manager! Bye PA-san!” Kita climbed the steps and took off, leaving the two older women to take care of Starry.

“Hm. I thought Kita-chan was going to say something about Ryo.” Seika mumbled. “I was joking when I said if she was jealous.”

“Eh, Manager? It’s pretty normal for Kita-chan to be a bit protective with Hitori-chan.” PA-san chimed. “They’re quite cute!”

“Hmm.”

I can trust that Nijika can talk it out with Kita-chan. Well, if it gets to that.

PA-san leaned over to see Seika’s face.

“You’re also jealous, aren’t you~”

“Oh, shut it you!”

“Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

The two joggers met up just outside of Starry. Nijika was wearing one of her sister’s old shirts, the hem of said shirt tied squarely by her waist since it was obviously oversized for her. She also wore jogging pants, paired with sneakers and her signature bow on her left wrist. She had her hair tied up in a ponytail. Meanwhile, Kita was wearing a loose sports shirt and shorts, with sweat bands on both of her wrists. Her side ponytail was forgone for another sweatband around her head. She had sneakers on too, confusing Nijika.

“I just realised. How do your school shoes fit in your bag?” Nijika asked.

“Hmm.” Kita thought about it. “I guess they just fit. See?”

Nijika peered into the abyss.

“Yeah, that still doesn’t explain it.”

“Maybe it’s one of those things that cannot be explained! Like how Hitori-chan transforms so often!”

“Hmm. Fair.”

“Anyways, we should do some light stretching first! Don’t want to pull a muscle.” Kita said.

“Oh, ok! I, uhh, don’t know any.” Nijika sheepishly said, fiddling with her bow.

“That’s ok! There’s always a first for everything. Just follow my lead!”

The girls did some stretching, a little bit awkwardly seeing as they were doing it by a livehouse.

“Heup! By the way, you... hrk! You look like Manager wearing that.” Kita said.

“R-really?” Nijika stopped stretching to get a good look at herself.

“Huh, I guess I do.”

“Does your sister exercise often?”

“Other than her running around to do errands or work stuff, never. The only reason why she isn’t gaining too much weight is because of my cooking.”

“Someone’s sounding a bit arrogant~” Kita poked at Nijika.

“Hey, it’s true! It’s the reason why I’m in shape too!” Nijika swatted away. “You haven’t even tried my cooking.”

“Well, I look forward to doing so!”

“So, where are we headed?”

“Hmm, not sure. I haven’t jogged around here in a while, and I’m still unfamiliar with Shimokitazawa.”

“I can help. We can pass by some landmarks and interesting locations. Makes the suffering somewhat bearable...”

“Oh, you’re too drab, Nijika-chan! You’ll feel good after all this! A healthy body is a healthy mind!”

“But I am healthy!”

“Alright!” Kita ignored Nijika. “We’ll start running and you can point me where to go next!”

“Roger that.”

...

“So, uhh. Are we going to go or what?” Nijika asked.

“Oh, I was waiting for you to go first. You’re my tour guide!” Kita beamed.

“Right.”

With that, Nijika set off into the streets of Shimokitazawa as Kita trailed behind.

The two introverts hobbled around aimlessly, with Hitori leading Ryo wherever. She hadn’t got a clue as to where to go, especially since Ryo hadn’t told her where. From the back of her mind, she knew that

Ryo knew that they were to head to the record shop Ryo wanted both of them to go to. Kind of. It's not like she can read minds.

That's more of Kita-san's thing.

She couldn't muster up the courage to ask the bassist, and so they continued to hobble.

...

After walking around for what seemed like ages, Ryo spoke up.

"So, umm. Where are we going?"

"E-eh?"

Oh right. I am the one who's walking the both of us.

"I d-don't know?" Hitori spoke to the ground.

"So, we've been walking to nowhere."

"Y-yes. S-sorry..."

"Honestly, I shouldn't be surprised." Ryo hummed. "C'mon, wanna visit the record shop I frequent?"

Hitori nodded. "A-ah, but I don't k-know where that is."

"Don't worry Bocchi. I have amazing photographic memory. I'll lead us to victory."

"O-oh, ok. I'll be in y-your care then."

"Ok, so I think we turn left at the end of this street, then..."

The two set forth on their great journey to find the fabled record shop that Ryo frequents. Hitori kept on slogging, tired from having to sort-of carry her introverted friend around. At first, Hitori was glad that

Ryo, despite her aloof nature, knew where they were going. She could never remember things well, except the things she obsesses over, which excluded directions. But as they continued to walk, she started to have her doubts.

Isn't that the same corner we were just on five minutes ago? That pole looks very familiar...

"And then take a right here, Bocchi." Ryo went on.

"U-umm, Ryo-san?" Hitori spoke. "I th-think we're going in circles."

"What makes you say that?"

"Th-this is the corner where we started walking f-from."

Ryo craned her head to look at the surrounding area.

"You're right."

"S-so, do y-you know where the record sh-shop is or n-n-not?"

"Of course I do. I just... forgot."

"Y-you never knew, h-huh."

"..."

Hitori just shook her head. They were hopelessly lost at this point.

"Wait. I'll search the deepest pits of my brain to find where it is. Don't worry, Bocchi." Ryo shot a thumbs up.

How can I not worry?

"O-okay."

Hitori waddled over to a nearby bench for both of them to sit on, while Ryo focused all of her mind power in remembering where the

record shop was. She had her eyes shut and stilled her breathing, keeping a hand near her chest.

C'mon Ryo. Bocchi is counting on you. Remember where the record shop you literally visit almost everyday to. It shouldn't be hard.

"Hnnnnng." Ryo grunted.

Hitori swung her legs on the bench, occasionally looking back at Ryo to see if she made any progress. She now had her hands on her temples, as if she was projecting her thoughts.

Why is this so difficult? Is my brain this empty? C'mon Ryo! Just remember where it is.

"Hmmmmmmmm.."

Hitori looked up at the sky, thinking that today really was a nice day to be outside. As much of an indoor person she is, she always liked looking out of her window (when she did anyways) and to the skies. She adored how lovely a blue sky looked, with scattered fluffy clouds floating above. It was a bit childish now that she thought about it, and she really wasn't that into nature. But, being stuck (intentionally) inside a closet for most of your life makes you wish to be outside and with nature. Putting it that way left a sour taste in Hitori's mind. It sounded a little more sad than it was.

She took another look at Ryo, who was now visibly sweating.

Where is it, where is it, where is it, where is it? It should be here somewhere? When was the last time I was there? Like, yesterday. Okay, so what did I do before then? I don't know. I don't KNOW!

"Hnngk, grrrrk, rrrrnng..."

Hitori felt a gush of wind, turning her attention back to her surroundings. Although it was a pretty sunny day, the breeze made it quite nice to be outside. No rain clouds in sight, nor anything that

would supposedly ruin the day. In a rare instance, Hitori was glad to be outside. Sure, she still has that gnawing part of her brain repeatedly telling her all the ‘what ifs’ and possible scenarios, some bordering on the impossible. But, she was able to push that aside and just... take in the sights and sounds of life. It was nice.

Another look. Ryo was drilling her fingers into the sides of her head.

It has to be close to the train station, right? Right?!? I don't like walking far, unless Nijika drags me somewhere. Has Nijika dragged me to the record shop? Ever?

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmm..."

Though, she knows that she couldn't stay outside for too long, even on a lovely day like this. She reminisced her summer memories, when the band went to Enoshima, and how she was only able to make it through the whole day because she was knocked out for some part of that day and Kita took care of her. Speaking of said redhead, she really did take care of Hitori well that day. That was really sweet of her, which wasn't a surprise to Hitori since she's sweet all the time. Diabetically sweet at times. Many times, actually.

Another look. Ryo was almost punching her head at this point.

Where, where, where, where, where, where, where, where, where,
where, where, where-

Kita's been a really good friend to Hitori, even though she thinks that the both of them are polar opposites. She was getting better at belittling herself less frequently, and that was mostly because Kita kept spouting amazing things about the pinkhead. If she can find an endless list of compliments for Hitori, then maybe she herself isn't as undesirable as she thought. Of course, Hitori knows that Kita's energy is part of her personality, but nevertheless it still makes her feel good about herself.

Another look. Ryo was gripping the bench.

The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell. It's like the generator that keeps the cell alive and functioning. But, what does this correlate to where the record shop is, Ryo?!?!?

But now, that redhead wants to be Hitori's sister? She thinks. Is it normal for friends to want to be part of your family, even though they say that they are happy in their own? Is it normal for friends to say that in a casual setting? Was being in a driving school a casual setting?

Nevermind that, what does it mean to be someone's sister? What did Kita mean by that? She did say that they can both be 'guitar sisters' - whatever that means. And Hitori doesn't mind that: Kita's happy and Hitori gets to be an inch closer with the redhead. It's a win win! Or maybe that's not what Kita wants? Maybe she wants something more? Hitori couldn't tell.

...

Wait. Does Kita want her to be her gi-

"I got it!" Ryo shouted, startling Hitori out of her thoughts.

"Y-you remember now?" Hitori asked, internally begging that she finally remembered.

"No."

Hitori slumped further into the bench.

"But, I can ask Nijika. Gimme a sec."

Ryo pulled out her phone and rang Nijika. She waited for a bit before the blonde answered.

"W-what." A breathy Nijika said. Sounds of footsteps and panting can be heard.

"Where's the record shop I go to all the time again?"

“W-why are you... hah, hah, hah... you asking th-this now?”

“I forgot.”

“Ughhhhhhhhhh... Kita-chan, c-can we take a little, heeeh, b-break?”

“Sure! I’m tired as well...” Kita said in the background.

The footsteps slowly dissipated and Ryo heard the both of them sit down somewhere. The heavy breathing of Nijika filled the phone’s speakers.

“Hey Nijika, can you breathe a little quieter?” Ryo asked.

“Heuh, heuh, heuh... no.” Nijika panted harder. “Kita-chan, how l-long have we been jogging?”

A pause. Ryo couldn’t hear what Kita was saying.

“Fifteen minutes?!”

“Nijika-chan, don’t melt on the bench!” Kita shouted on the other end.

“So, where’s the record shop?” Ryo asked again.

“... ”

“Sorry Ryo-chan, give Nijika-chan a moment to rest. Her legs are super wobbly right now.” Kita took Nijika’s phone. “Hehe, they’re like jelly.”

“Ok. Don’t poke them.”

“W-what makes you think I’d be doing that, Ryo-chan?”

“I dunno. Touching someone’s legs is weird.”

...

“You’re weird, Kita.”

“I didn’t touch them!”

Ryo sat. Hitori squirmed in her seat, getting impatient that asking for directions is taking this long. She did not feel like getting lost in her own thoughts again.

“S-so...” Hitori spoke.

“Nijika’s resting. Give her a minute.” Ryo responded.

“Ah, okay...”

“If you’re gonna breathe that hard, please keep the phone away from you, Kita.”

“Well, I’m sorry I’m tired!” Kita yelled. Ryo had to move the phone away from her face. “Anyways, how are you two? Haven’t gotten into any trouble?”

“Nope. We’ve just been walking aimlessly for the past half an hour.”

“You mean Hitori-chan’s been dragging you aimlessly for the past half an hour.”

“It sounds bad when you put it that way. Besides, we both knew we were going to the record shop. Telepathic connection.”

“Y-yeah.” Hitori peeped. Her insides sighed with relief that she wasn’t wrong.

“So, why’d you two keep going?” Kita asked.

“I have no idea with Bocchi.” Ryo said. “I can’t, like, stop her y’know.”

“A-ah-eueh-s-s-sorry!” Hitori bowed.

“Put me on speaker, Ryo-chan.” Kita said. “Hitori-chan! Don’t be sorry! It’s this idiot’s fault for-”

“Ok, enough of that.” Ryo switched back to calling mode. “But don’t beat yourself up, Bocchi. I’m sorry.”

“I-i-it’s ok, Ryo-san. Today is q-uite a nice day to walk anyways.” Hitori smiled.

“Yeah.” Ryo smiled back.

“Ok, I’m recovered.” Nijika took her phone back. “The record shop, right?”

“Yep.”

The blonde proceeded to interrogate the bassist about her whereabouts, any nearby landmarks and even the Sun’s location. Hitori could only imagine the calculations running through the drummer’s head.

“Ok, phew.” Nijika sighed. “You’re pretty close I think. Just take a right when you get to the end of the nearby intersection. That should be the same street where the record shop is. You’re lucky I somehow remember this, Ryo.”

“I am lucky. Thanks Nijika.” Ryo shot a thumbs up, before putting her thumb away when she realised she was calling. Hitori suppressed a giggle.

“Yeah, yeah. Stay safe you two. Oh, and Bocchi-chan?”

Ryo shoved the phone over to Hitori, who almost dropped it.

“Y-y-yes?”

“Don’t make Ryo take any more money than you’re willing to give, okay?”

“I’ll m-make sure of that.”

“Good.”

“C’mon, Nijika-chan! Sitting down too much after a run isn’t good for your legs.” Kita can be heard, the light pitter patter of her shoes being picked up by the phone. Seems Kita was raring to go.

“Ugh, I beg to differ. Well, I gotta go suffer now. Bye Bocchi-chan! Bye Ryo.”

“You could at least pretend you’re having fun...” Kita softly muttered on the other side.

“Bye Nijika-chan.” Hitori handed back Ryo’s phone. “Nijika-chan said bye.”

“Heh. Of course she did.” Ryo was about to stand up to stretch, but stopped when she realised she probably shouldn’t. “Help me up?”

“O-ok.” Hitori helped Ryo up. “You s-sure you know where we’re going now?”

“Yes.” Ryo said, looking at Hitori. “For real this time.”

“Right.”

Seika watched as the time on her laptop flashed 3:00p.m. She sighed, knowing that neither party would be back until later in the day. She didn’t have any extra work to give them, so it was alright that they were enjoying their time outside.

“You alright, Manager?” PA-san asked, a juicebox in hand. “You’ve been sulking ever since they left.”

“I’m not sulking.” Seika grumbled. “I’m just worried about them.”

“Whatever you say~”

PA-san went back to drinking her apple juice when she thought of something.

“Unleeeeeeess...” PA-san crept up behind Seika. “You’re feeling lonely.”

“No, I’m not!” Seika denied as she turned around to almost stuff her face inside one of her oversized sleeves. She swatted the sleeve away. “I have you here!”

“Aww, how sweet of you Manager. Considering how loyal I am, perhaps I could be-”

“No.”

“Doesn’t hurt to try.” PA-san shrugged and finished her apple juice.

Seika finished typing up an email, shutting off her laptop. She rubbed her eyes. She needed to not look at a screen for a day. Or a week.

A prescription to shut my eyes for the rest of my life would be really nice.

“I’m getting old.” Seika mumbled.

“What makes you say that, Manager?” PA-san turned to Seika. “You’re still pretty for someone at your age.”

“And that age is?”

“I don’t think I need to say it, Manager. Especially when you scrunch your face like that~”

Seika groaned.

“Please don’t remind me how old I am.”

“Hey, you’re the one who brought it up!”

“And if you said that to get a raise, then you might as well give up any future attempts.”

“No, I was being serious. For someone in their 30s, you look fine. Better than fine.”

“How would you know about pretty women? You stay indoors all day and take care of a potted plant.”

“I don’t take offence to that. Oh, I never told you my potted plant’s name! It’s-”

Seika covered PA-san’s mouth before she could speak further about her plant.

“I didn’t ask.”

PA-san mumbled something incoherent in Seika’s hand.

“What? You know I can’t-**WHAT THE?**”

Seika immediately recoiled, finding her hand to be a little moist. She eyed her hand in horror.

“DID YOU JUST-”

“I said, that’s a little harsh, Manager~” PA-san cheekily said.

“Eww, gross! This should be under workplace harassment!” Seika wiped her hand on a tissue, walking over to the bar to cleanse the filth she just experienced.

“Aren’t you the manager, Manager? Shouldn’t you know about that?”

“Shut up!” Seika scrubbed her hands vigorously.

“Hehe!” PA-san giggled, hiding her face behind her sleeve. “Sorry. I know how much of a germaphobe you are.”

“Dang right you do!”

“You might not want to scrub your hands too much. You’ll dry them up quick like that.”

“Oh, shut it you!”

Will Nijika collapse in exhaustion? Will Ryo and Hitori ever make it to the record shop? And where is Nijicat? Tune in on the second part of Chapter 9!

Was planning to finish the whole chapter, but finals are kicking my butt. So, here the first part, which is mostly just setup for later scenes. It's also why it's a bit short, at least to me it is.

Bocchi penguin waddling. Kita do be looking like a skeleton. SANS UNDERTALE KITA??? I don't know, they sounded funny in my head.

I realised that even though I split the band up, they still kind of get together through Ryo's phone. Truly the Kessoku Band is strong.

It's probably going to be until Chapter 526 before PA-san's potted plant's name is revealed. Riveting.

Next part whenever! Most likely after my finals.

Chapter 9 (part 2)

Chapter 16: Chapter 9 (part 2)

Both pairs go about their days, though each guitarist has something to share.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Dear diary. Err, mental diary. Whatever.

It's been forever since we left. Food and water have gone scarce. I haven't seen a vending machine in ages. Isn't Shimokitazawa supposed to have them littered everywhere? Ugh.

The other one says we've been out for almost an hour now. The-

"Umm, it's actually been an hour and a half."

Thank you. An hour and a half. The dizziness is starting to get to me. My vision is blurry and I can barely keep with the other one. That would be embarrassing. I'm only a year older!

I can't even focus on my rhythm anymore. Kind of ironic, considering this is me we're talking about here. Or is it thinking about?

My mind... can't think... my body... is too... weak...

"Nijika-chan, if you want to say you need to rest, just say so." Kita stopped Nijika in her tracks. "Urk! Don't flop on me!"

"Ehehe, s-sorry..." Nijika breathed out, before gargling out something.

"You were thinking out loud too."

“Hehehehehe...”

Kita let Nijika lean on her shoulder, guiding the both of them to a nearby bench.

“K-Kita-chan, our sweat is... mixing.” Nijika pointed out. “Like... sweat soup.”

“Why do you have to say that?” Kita deadpanned, plopping the blonde jelly onto the bench.

“I don’t... know. It’s funny, hehehe...”

“Anyways,” Kita ignored Nijika’s eccentricities. “I’ll go get us some drinks by the near vending machine.”

“We passed by one?!?” Nijika suddenly shouted. “Where?”

“You really need to rest, Nijika-chan. It’s normal to get blurry vision the more tired you are, but you were at the verge of collapsing!” Kita said.

“There it is, ahahahahaah!” Nijika ran off toward the vending machine.

“Didn’t you listen to what I said?!” Kita shouted after her.

“Oh, how I missed you! Give me your sweet nectar.”

“Eww, Nijika-chan! Don’t kiss it!”

“S-sorry you had to, umm, see that Kita-chan.” Nijika meekly shuffled on the bench, sipping her lemonade.

“You’re even weirder than Hitori-chan sometimes, Nijika-chan. And that’s saying something.” Kita said, chugging on her iced tea.

“Yeah. Although you should be used to it, considering the amount of time you spend with her.”

“That’s not how it works!”

“Sure it does!”

Nijika thought for a moment.

“It should anyways.”

“Nijika-chan, you being more well-versed in weirdness makes you weird.”

“Well, sorry that I spend most of my time with you, a weirdo and Bocchi-chan!” Nijika poked Kita. “Hmm, kinda makes you weirder that you spend time with all of us.”

“What? No way!”

“Denying it makes it seem more true~”

“Oh, shush and drink your lemonade.”

The two girls sipped their drinks in peace, refreshed by the chill entering their bodies. Nijika looked around, finally familiar with her surroundings. She noticed that they were pretty close to Starry.

“We’ve almost made a lap around the whole city. I think?” Kita said.

“Seems that way. When you put it like that, I’m kind of proud of myself.” Nijika huffed. “Who knew that little ol’ me ran around the whole city?”

“Under two hours too! I might consider Shimokitazawa more the next time I go jogging.”

“Woooooow, no invite for me?”

“Of course you’re invited, Nijika-chan! You live here!”

“Though, I might want to pass. I know my body’s going to ache after all this.” Nijika sighed.

“Someone’s getting old.” Kita prodded.

“One year older. And don’t you forget it!” Nijika bonked Kita on the head.

Both girls giggled.

“I’m glad you’ve settled nicely with us, Kita-chan.” Nijika commented, sipping her lemonade.

“Eh?” Kita tilted her head. “That came out of nowhere.”

“Mmm. I’m just happy for you, is all.”

“Aww. Thanks Nijika-chan!” Kita flashbanged the poor blonde, leaving her blind. “Although, I don’t think that’s the only reason why you said that.”

Rubbing her eyes, Nijika responded, “Yeah, it isn’t.”

Nijika rolled her lemonade between her hands.

“We aren’t the most normal bunch. Ryo and her endless antics, Bocchi-chan being... herself, and me with my obsession for the band. Must be a far cry from your other friends.”

“O-oh.” Kita deliberated what to say next. “I would be lying if I said no. But, I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t like hanging out with you guys!”

“Hmm?”

“I do prefer spending time with you all compared to my other friends. I dunno, maybe it’s because you’re all so different! Or, the fact that we’re all working towards something and we’re actually doing it.

I've... always wanted to have a second family to nestle in - I think I've said that before, hehe. And, I'm glad that I found it."

Kita dimmed to a glow, small yet genuine.

"Who knew you were such a big sap?" Nijika lightly shoved Kita.

"Hey! I was being honest there!" Kita shoved back.

"Hahaha, yeah. Thanks for that, Kita-chan. It reminds me that Kessoku Band isn't just a dream. It's a reality."

"You got that right!" Kita winked.

Another sip. Nijika really wanted to savour each drop of lemonade.

"Ok, kind of random, but are you... ok with wearing that? They aren't like some old sports clothes?" Nijika pointed at Kita.

"What do you mean, Nijika-chan? They fit fine." Kita gave herself a good look.

"No, no. I meant they... well, maybe it might just be me, but they do show off a lot of skin. I get that that's the point for sports clothes, but isn't this a bit much?"

Kita looked at herself again, somewhat getting what Nijika was saying. Her shirt was quite loose, doing a bad job of hiding her bare stomach whenever she bobbed up and down while she ran. Her wide sleeves also made it easy for anyone to peer at her armpits. Her shorts were scarily high above her knees, showing off her bare legs.

"I'm not a skeleton, Nijika-chan. I think I look fine." Kita said, posing to accentuate her point. "My thighs aren't as bony as they were before."

"Not that!" Nijika grumbled, fumbling her words to find a way to say what she meant. "... you're okay with showing that much skin?"

“Mhmm! Besides, I’m jogging!”

“Ok yes, I get that, just... ugh, I don’t know where I’m going with this. I’m getting embarrassed just looking at you.”

“That’s alright, I was guessing from how you dress that you don’t like showing skin much.”

“Yeah. Might have gotten it from Ryo and Sis’s styles, but I also personally don’t like showing skin. Other than my school uniform or on super hot days. On the plus side, long clothing is much more comfy!”

“True! Although, for me, I look like a child when wearing baggy clothing.”

Nijika took another sip.

“Where do you get the confidence to show that much skin?” Nijika asked. “I always fear that I’ll look fat in stuff like that.”

“Okay. One: you aren’t fat. Two - up, up! I won’t hear it, Nijika-chan! You’re perfectly fine as you are.”

“I mean, do you see this?” Nijika lifted her shirt and poked at her stomach. “Heh, ok maybe I shouldn’t - woah, hey Kita-chan!”

“If I have to tickle you so that you get it, I will!” Kita assaulted.

“Hahaha, cut i-it out!” Nijika slipped in her laughter. It did not halt the endless barrage.

After Kita had enough, Nijika took a breather.

“I hate that you know my tickle spot.” Nijika pouted.

“Hehe! And you’ll never know mine!” Kita stuck her tongue out.

“Just you wait.”

Another sip.

"I get your point. I might be a bit too conscious about my figure."

"Trying to impress anybody?" Kita teased.

"Probably myself."

"Oh. Do you struggle to look at yourself in the mirror?"

"It's not that bad, Kita-chan. I guess we're just... different. When it comes to showing ourselves anyways."

"Alright! I know more than anyone not to push someone to do something they don't want to do."

Nijika glared at Kita.

"Most of the time!" Kita added.

"Well, to be fair, I do need to get out of the house - err, livehouse - more often." Nijika admitted.

"See? And, you'll build muscle. So that you don't feel fat anymore!"

"Ughhh. Is there any way to have a nice figure AND not exercise? I get a ton anyways from work."

"Mmmm, other than being born with it, nope! Why do you think I've been jogging?"

Nijika grumbled.

"Fine. But I'll only jog with you. Jogging alone sounds depress- I mean, a totally fine thing to do that is not for me." Nijika recovered.

"Nice save, Leader." Kita deadpanned.

"Th-thanks?"

“But I’m glad to hear that!” Kita blasted, making the blonde wince. “I’ll go jogging even more often now that I know you’re on board!”

“Yay. Can’t wait.”

Nijika finished her lemonade.

“Aww. Hmm, we’ve been here for a while now.” Nijika looked around for a trashcan.

“Yep! Wanna jog a bit more?” Kita jumped up from the bench.

“I’d like to, but...” Nijika poked her legs, void of any response. “... yeah. Maybe a little bit more rest?”

Kita sighed. “This is what sitting down too much after exercise does to you! But alright. We can chat while we, umm, wait for your legs.”

“That is not a sentence I would ever hear from someone.”

“Well, you’re weird Nijika-chan.”

“Hey. More like my legs are weird.”

Both girls laughed.

“You want me to get you another bottle?” Kita asked.

“No thanks. Unlike you, I watch how much I drink.” Nijika declined.

“I burn it off fast! How about some water then?”

“Sure. It’ll help wash down the lemonade. Thanks Kita-chan!”

“I’ll be right back.”

Kita hopped off and skipped to the vending machine, leaving Nijika to sit and take in the atmosphere.

Today's a nice day to jog, huh. Maybe jogging isn't so bad.

"I'm back! Here!" Kita handed a water bottle to Nijika.

"Thanks Kita-chan." Nijika accepted the bottle and took a sip. "Ahh~"

"Can't go wrong with water?"

"Oh, absolutely. 2nd favourite drink, right under lemonade."

"Pfft, kind of funny that you like yellow drinks, Nijika-chan."

Nijika choked. "**cough** oh my- don't say that while I'm drinking!"

"What? Yellow drinks? What's wrong with yellow drinks?"

Nijika beated her chest, clearing her throat. "I was thinking of a certain one."

"Huh? But which one would..." Realisation hit the redhead. "Oh. Oh! Eww, why?"

"Blame Ryo and the amount of times she called Inkling a 'pee squid'!" Nijika explained.

"That doesn't make it better! You're disgusting!" Kita lightly slapped the blonde.

"Nothing I say will make it better!"

"A- ok, fair." Kita hesitantly took a sip of her unfinished iced tea.

"You're lucky I like sweet drinks a lot."

"An unhealthy amount."

"Sounds like a metabolism issue, Nijika-chan~"

"Yeah, yeah."

Nijika took a swig.

“So, knowing my legs, we’re gonna be here for a while. Anything you want to talk about?” Nijika sighed.

“Are your legs single?”

Nijika spat out her water.

“*cough*, *cough*, h-huh?”

“Oh sorry.” Kita snickered.

“I meant, do you mind if we talk about... someone?” Kita asked, suddenly shuffling on her seat. “Someone important.”

“U-uu-uhh, sure??” Nijika shook her head.

Did I hear that correctly? That had Ryo’s name all over it...

“Who?”

“Ah, w-well. It’s... Hitori-chan...” Kita mumbled.

“Oh, Bocchi-chan? Yeah, what about-” Nijika cut herself off. “Oh. Oh~”

“Not like that, Nijika-chan!”

“And you expect me to believe that?” Nijika smirked. “So, developments did happen, hmmm?”

“No!” Kita yelled, then thought about it. “Okay! Maybe!”

“R-really?” Nijika’s smirk morphed into bewilderment. “I was kind of kidding when I said that.”

“Mmmmmmm...” Kita pouted as her cheeks flared up in pink.

“Haha, okay Kita-chan. I’ll lend an ear.” Nijika patted the redhead.

“Gimme a moment.”

Kita prepped herself by lightly slapping her cheeks, taking deep breaths.

“Ok, I’m ready.”

“Alright! I’m all ears!”

...

“Kita-chan.”

“I... yeah.”

Kita sighed.

“I’ll just get to the point.”

Nijika nodded at her to start, keeping a small reassuring smile on her face.

“I... really. Really. Admire Hitori-chan.”

“Yeah, I think anyone can see that from a mile away.”

Kita shot a look at the blonde.

“Right, sorry.”

“And, I feel that it might be more than just admiration.”

Nijika kept silent, so Kita continued.

“But, I don’t want this to be another ‘Ryo-senpai’ phase. I do feel a lot more... mmm, attracted... to Hitori-chan than Ryo-chan, but I’m not sure if this is... I-love... Ughh, I’m doubting myself.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want it to be shallow. Because I don’t want to ruin what we all have together. Because... I don’t want to hurt Hitori-chan. I’m unsure of myself, Nijika-chan. I can’t tell if this is true, genuine love or because I’ve been spending a lot of time with Hitori-chan. I know how easy it is to, well to put it bluntly, manipulate her. I don’t want to force her into a relationship. And knowing Hitori-chan, she’ll keep silent about being uncomfortable in something like that.”

Kita turned her gaze to the floor.

“She doesn’t deserve that. After how much she’s pushed herself for us. How much she’s pushed herself... for me.”

“You... really thought this through.”

“Yes, Nijika-chan! She’s my close friend, and I’m being absolutely serious! Heartbreak is no joke.”

“Ok, ok.”

“There is a part of me that really wants this, and another part that is truly content with us being close friends. Besides, a relationship would only get in the way of the band, right?”

“Kita-chan...”

Kita took another sip.

“You know, Kita-chan.” Nijika spoke up, prompting Kita to look at her. “In all honesty, I’m not against it. Really. We’d probably sound even better with a power couple like you two jamming with us.”

“Mmmm, but the breakup would eventually break up the band...” Kita sulked.

Nijika raised an eyebrow.

“You are thinking way too hard about this.”

“Huh?”

“Why are you thinking of a breakup, Kita-chan?”

“W-well, it could-”

“Ah, that’s the issue. You both haven’t even gotten together and now you’re considering all the ‘what ifs’.”

Nijika placed her hand on Kita’s shoulder.

“I may not know much about romance. Heck, as far as I know, I know absolutely nothing! But, isn’t love like a leap of faith? A chance to take, a gamble to play, a risk to go for? It’s great that you’re thinking for Bocchi-chan, but let’s keep those negative thoughts away. Any more and you’ll brew up a storm!”

Kita giggled.

“I know you think this might become one of your impulsive moments, but that’s how love’s like. At least, to me that’s what it’s like. So, ask her out. Don’t you have faith in her that if you love her, she’ll love you back?”

Kita mulled over Nijika’s words.

“You’re... you’re right. I’m not giving her enough credit.”

“She’s a sensitive soul, but she’s got the resilience to back herself up. Even if you two don’t work out, we’ll still be rocking and rolling!” Nijika pumped her fist in the air.

“Hehe, yeah!” Kita joined in.

“And, well, if things don’t go well, we’re always here. Me and Ryo.”

Nijika paused.

“Ok, just me.”

“Hey, Nijika-chan! Ryo-chan can give good advice when it counts!”

“Yeah right.”

The two giggled.

“I can’t believe you talked to me about your crush and not our ‘I-can-get-us-to-dally-with-the-ladies’ Ryo.”

“I know I just said that she gives good advice. But. Mmmmmmm...”

“C’mon, say it~”

“She’ll just laugh at me and say something stupid, like ‘I knew it.’”
Kita grumbled and crossed her arms. “Or, I dunno, she actually might give helpful advice, before dragging me to some café for free food.”

“Hah! Classic Ryo. Yeah, she and I are horrible with romance.” Nijika soothed the redhead.

“And that’s why I asked you for help.” Kita said sarcastically.

“I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you be sarcastic. They grow up so fast...”

“Hey!”

Both girls snickered.

“Hey. Bocchi-chan’s fragile, but not that fragile.” Nijika said.

Kita tilted her head.

“Bad analogy, but you know what I mean. Go tell her and see what she thinks.”

“Wouldn’t that be kinda... bad?”

“How? She’s gonna be your girlfriend-”

“Potential girlfriend! There’s a difference!”

“Ok, that. Just tell her about the idea and see how she responds.”

“... and if she says n-no?”

“Then it’s a no. Not the end of the world, or the destruction of mankind, or the extinction of-”

“I get it, I get it, Nijika-chan. Gosh.” Kita lightly shoved Nijika. “*sigh*, alright. I won’t run away from this anymore. No more beating around the bush. I’ll talk to her.”

“And in the end, you’ll both still be close friends. A win win.”

“Right.”

“Hmm, hmm~” Nijika hummed. “I had imagined that Bocchi-chan would have this kind of problem. It suits her more than you.”

“Huh.” Kita grunted. “Guess she’s rubbing off on me. Hehe, next thing you know, I’ll be coming to practise in a box.”

“Don’t talk bad about your girlfriend~”

“She’s not my girlfriend!”

“Sorry, I meant ‘potential girlfriend’~”

“Ughhhhh.” Kita groaned. She imagined Nijika would be teasing her even more if Kita and Hitori got together. “Whatever, you pee drinker.”

“Wha-hey! Your fault for bringing that up, raspberry head!” Nijika shouted.

“Suuuuure, Nijika-chan. Sure. Are your legs good to go now?”

Nijika slowly got up to stretch her legs.

“Yup! And good timing, all this romance talk is making me want to run.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Kita got up as well. “But, I could use the jog to wear off any adrenaline that I might have.”

“You don’t make sense.”

“Hey, Nijika-chan. That’s a little mean!”

“What are you going to do about it, slowpoke?” Nijika teased, before dashing off.

“Hey! Cheater!” Kita ran after the blonde. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“This is i-it?”

“Yep. Pretty cosy.”

With some concrete direction, the pair finally made it to the fabled record shop. It was tucked away in a corner of some street, mixed with the numerous closed stores scattered in Shimokitazawa, not surprising to the guitarist knowing Ryo’s fascination of the niche. While wobbling to the record shop, she noticed the slight sadden expressions Ryo had as she looked around. The place must have been more active before.

The outside of the shop looked insignificant. There were no windows to peer through, leaving the bright neon ‘OPEN’ sign to be the only thing to look at. Hitori expected to see posters or a sign, considering how tough it is nowadays for shops like this one to keep running with the rise of digital sharing. Either they didn’t bother with adapting or

they had enough devoted customers to stay afloat. Hitori thought of the latter.

Ushered in by Ryo, Hitori pushed the door open. A small chime caught the attention of the store clerk, behind the counter.

“Oh? A new face? Didn’t think I’d see someone new.” The man adjusted his glasses. “Ahh, no wonder. Hey Ryo! Been a while, hmm?”

“Hey.” Ryo waved behind the pinkhead.

“No new selections today, I’m afraid. Though, seeing as you brought someone new here, that shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Mmm. Thanks.”

“Go knock yourself-oh! Where are my manners?” The man slapped his forehead. “Hi there, I’m... umm. Is your friend alright?”

“Mmm?” Ryo shuffled to get a better look at Hitori.

The poor girl had a twitch in her eye as she shook.

Did I just... push a ‘pull’ door. You idiot, Hitori! There’s a reason why they put a sign there that says ‘pull’ or push! You even saw it as you went in, and you still messed it up! Oh gosh, now he’s going to kick me out for my ignorance! And then, Ryo-san will get mad at me and leave me to rot in the streets! Then, eventually they’ll...

“Sorry. She’s sometimes like this.” Ryo explained.

“Heh. She’s weird. Not weirder than you, though.” The man huffed. “Don’t worry, she’ll feel right at home here.”

“That’s why I brought her here.”

“Oh, good. Good. You sure you don’t need me to...”

“Nah. I got it.” Ryo moved in front of the pinkhead, holding her hand.
“She’ll be back in a bit.”

“Alright then-oh my gosh, are you ok Ryo? Your leg.”

“Oh, that. Just a sprain. I’m fine.”

“I-if you say so. I’ll just be here if you need me.”

“Thanks.”

Since she had the energy to spare (at least in Ryo’s mind, realistically she could do it regardless), Ryo guided Hitori to one of the aisles in the shop. She was searching for some songs to listen to when Hitori came back.

“A-ah, I’m-eh? Where am... oh, Ryo-san.” Hitori blinked. “S-sorry about th-that.”

“Lemme guess. You pushed instead of pulled?” Ryo smirked.

“Y-yes...”

“That’s ok, Bocchi.” Ryo went back to song finding. “I did that too when I first came here.”

“R-really?”

“Mmm. Trust me, the owner doesn’t mind. As long as you open the door, he’s cool.”

“I see...” Hitori responded. This was a funny way of comforting someone.

Hitori looked around at the unfamiliar. The record shop was pretty small, vacant of any other customers. The whole place was dimly lit, yet had enough light for customers to see what they were listening to. There were aisles and aisles of records, some in tapes and others in record disks. All were segregated by genre, though some of

the genres Hitori saw on the signs were foreign to her. Perhaps this is where Ryo gets her unique taste in music.

“I come here often to relax.” Ryo said, gaze still searching for a song. “They have basically any niche genre here. This is the only place that has them.”

“Ah.” Hitori replied, taking in the environment. It reminded her of her closet, steadying her heartbeat to a calming rhythm.

“The owner set up shop not too long ago. He’s mainly doing this since there isn’t any other place like this. Pretty cool, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“Bingo. Found it.” Ryo pulled out a tape with an album cover Hitori didn’t recognise. “Let’s listen, Bocchi.”

“A-ah, ok.” Hitori nodded, following Ryo to what seemed to be where people would listen to music.

Hitori felt that it was a bit awkward to pick out a tape or disk and then walk over to the corner to listen to it, considering it would be much better to just listen to it as you find it, but she appreciated the uniqueness. They waltzed to the corner of the shop, littered in numerous audio equipment. Hitori even saw a gramophone, something she thought she would never see.

“Cool, right.” Ryo said, taking in a little pride that she showed Hitori this place. “This place is filled with antiques.”

They probably also fetch good prices too. Not that the owner would ever let me get any of it.

“Yeah, it is. S-so, which one do we use?” Hitori asked.

“This one.”

Ryo slotted in the tape, then pulled the drawer below the machine. She grabbed two pairs of headphones and a dual headphone jack for both of them to listen to simultaneously.

“Put these on.” Ryo instructed. “This might sound a little weird at first, but the instrumentation is peak.”

“O-ok.” Hitori put on her headphones and plugged them into the jack.

Ryo pressed play on the device, letting the music wash over both of them. Hitori had never done something like this. Sure, maybe listening to some songs with interesting guitar patterns with Kita, but not something that she would go out of her way to do like right now. She watched as Ryo bobbed her head up and down, matching the rhythm of the song. Hitori slowly did the same, somewhat forgetting her surroundings and focusing solely on the music that was playing.

Ryo was right. It did sound weird. But then Hitori noticed how the drums were on beat, despite the unconventional playing style that she thought not even Nijika knew about. She heard how irritable the guitarist was, yet stayed on track for the whole song. Then, she realised how wild the bass sounded, filled with slaps and other techniques she didn’t know about.

No wonder Ryo likes this.

The song faded to an end, prompting Ryo to turn to Hitori, taking off her headphones.

“So, how was it?” Ryo asked with a smirk.

“Good. R-really good.” Hitori smiled. “I can see w-why you like it here.”

“Heh. Wanna listen to another track? Maybe something different.”

“Sure.”

The two proceeded to listen to a multitude of songs from a diverse array of genres. Ryo kept mentioning specific bits and bobs about each song, some of which Hitori also noticed while they listened. It was relaxing for the both of them as they continued to sift through the song collections, nerding out about the instrumentation or the different techniques they noticed. Some songs surprised Ryo, as she had forgotten how some of them went, getting to experience them as a pseudo-new listener. It helped that the two were mostly alone, as they walked from aisle to aisle to pick out something they liked. Hitori even picked out some songs for them to listen to, all of which were familiar to her. She was glad there were some songs here that she recognised.

“This is fun.” Hitori giggled. “I don’t t-think I could go here by myself, b-but if you plan to c-come back here, I could tag a-along? Unless you want to be alone, of c-course.”

“Nah, I don’t mind you coming with.” Ryo smiled. “We haven’t even listened to the really weird stuff they have here.”

“Th-thanks Ryo-san.”

Ryo went back to waddling over to find another song to listen to as Hitori checked her phone. It was already almost early evening, realising that they spent a solid two to three hours just listening to music.

Time flies when you’re having fun, right?

Although, there has been something that Hitori wanted to talk with Ryo about. It was always on the back of her mind ever since Ryo’s driving catastrophe, and it resurfaced again when she had her time of reflection earlier. She was glad that she was able to lose herself in the music to keep the thoughts about that ‘something’ at bay, but she knew that she needed to spill to someone. Keeping things bottled up tended to lead to more hurt, as Hitori reminisced on Kita’s outbreak before. It was funny too, considering that the ‘something’ was about

the redhead. Hitori wasn't laughing though. Maybe her humour was broken.

"A-ah, Ryo-san." Hitori mumbled as Ryo came back with an album cover in hand. "Is it o-ok if I can t-t-talk to you about s-something?"

"Sure. I need a break from listening to music anyways." Ryo placed down the album cover. "So, what's up?"

"W-w-well... errm, h-how do I? I-it's ab-about-n... no. I w-wanted t-t-to... hrmm..." Hitori struggled to start.

How do I start talking about Kita-san?

"Is it about Kita?" Ryo asked.

Hitori screeched.

"You girls alright?" The owner asked. "Last that I remember, most of the metal stuff we have is pretty tame."

"Yup, we're good." Ryo shouted. "Just my friend being herself."

"Ok then. Don't scare me like that, please."

"Roger."

Ryo lightly slapped Hitori's cheek, bringing her back into the land of the living.

"I think I hit the nail dead on. Though, you might not want to scream like that again." Ryo reassured.

"M-mmm." Hitori hummed in response.

Ryo gave a moment for Hitori to stabilise. Once Hitori seemed ready, she gave a small nod to the pinkhead.

“O-o-ok...” Hitori started. “I think Kita-san l-l-likes me. Ah, of c-course she likes me! I mean, l...”

“Love?” Ryo finished for Hitori. The meeker one of the pair nodded.

“... and, I d-don’t know how to feel. What to feel, really. I never h-had someone like me that way b-before. I never th-thought somebody would, to be honest. Someone as gloomy and downcast as m-me?”

Hitori sighed. She really shouldn’t be so downtrodden on herself like that.

“But I c-can’t change Kita-san’s mind about m-me. Besides, if she l-l-likes me, then she must see something in me that I d-don’t.”

“Mmm.” Ryo pondered. “I’d be more surprised if she didn’t see anything.”

“H-huh?”

“You’ve been her guitar teacher ever since she first joined us. Compared to you, she’d never keep up with us. And yet, here Kita is, standing with us as our vocalist and rhythm guitarist. Whatever you taught her, it’s working. Working too well. Even...*sigh*, even I couldn’t teach her that well.”

“B-but you helped teach her improv!”

“Bocchi, that’s nothing compared to what you’ve taught. Give yourself some more credit.”

“O-oh. Hehe, ehehehe-”

“Bocchi, not now.”

“S-sorry.”

“I do see your problem with hooking up with Kita. It’s draining just to spend a day with her, what more being her girlfriend.”

Hitori shook at the word 'girlfriend'. She never would have thought that she'd be thinking about that word and Kita at the same time. What universe were they in for this to happen? Why is it happening?

"I'm l-less worried about that, Ryo-san." Hitori said. "I just don't know if I... feel the s-same w-way about h-her."

"Go on."

"Y-you know that you guys are my f-first ever friends, as pathetic as t-that might sound. I... really like spending my time with y-you all, and I truly do not kn-know where I'd be without you all in my life."

Hitori fiddled with her headphones. The muffs felt pretty fluffy.

"Which is w-why I'm unsure about my f-feelings with Kita-san. I don't know if I really l-l... love her. I've n-never felt that kind of l-l-love before, and I'm... kind of scared. If she loves me, should I love her? I don't want to hurt Kita-san, b-but I also don't want her love if I don't want it. I feel bad just s-saying that..."

Hitori shrunk, having Ryo to pull her back up.

"Hey. At least you're being honest. Please don't melt again." Ryo said.

"I w-wasn't going to though..." Hitori mumbled.

"Sorry. Instincts."

Ryo cleared her throat.

"Kita looks up to you a lot. Everytime we hang out, she always somehow keeps mentioning you. Especially when we were practising for our surprise dance performance. You've done quite a lot in her life, and I would be more shocked if she didn't like you. It's okay if you don't know how to feel yet, but when it comes to the moment. When she eventually asks you out. Be honest with her and

tell her how you feel. Even if it isn't a yes, or it's a maybe. She'll understand, Bocchi."

"... ok. Thanks, Ryo-san."

"Anytime."

Score one to Ryo. Whooooo, yeah! I made that up on the spot, and yet it still hit hard and was helpful to Bocchi. I don't even know anything about romance! And I still killed it!

"A-ah, not saying this to s-sound arrogant, but what m-makes you think that she'll b-be the one to ask first?" Hitori asked.

"Come on, Bocchi. Be realistic." Ryo deadpanned.

"Ah, r-right. I could n-never..."

"And there's nothing wrong with that." Ryo awkwardly brushed Hitori's arm, stopping when she realised that it was awkward. "We still have some time before we should head back. Want to keep listening to music here?"

"Sure."

"6 to 4. I win again, Manager!"

"How are you so good at checkers?"

Not wanting Seika to keep checking the clock and the entrance of Starry, PA-san decided for them to play something. She struck gold when she searched the storage for entertainment, finding a checkerboard.

"I dunno. I secretly might be one of the best checkers players of all time~" PA-san winked.

“Yeah, right.” Seika sighed. “It’s nearly 6pm and the girls aren’t back.”

“So? Let them enjoy their days!”

“Ughh, you’re right. Rematch. Now.”

“Alright then, Manager. You’re going to have to-hmm?”

PA-san stood up to see the entrance of Starry open.

“I’m sorry, but we’re... oh! Hi Nijicat~” PA-san waved, shuffling towards the feline.

“What?!? Where?” Seika almost fell over her seat as she scrambled to put on two masks. Her WWII mask was at home, after Nijika scolded her for unironically using it for a cat.

“Do I just-oh. I think it likes me.” PA-san petted the cat as it rubbed itself against PA-san’s long skirt.

“Keep that thing away from me. The last thing I need is-bwah!” Seika jumped as she saw Nijicat sitting by her, its head tilted.

“Hehe, I think Nijicat wants you to pet it~” PA-san cooed.

“M-me?”

We don’t have gloves here, dang it. And she’s going to tease the living life out of me if I don’t pet Nijicat. Ughh, I have to risk it.

“O-okay.” Seika said, inching her shaking hand closer to the feline. “I never had a pet before, so I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Just ruffle its fur a little.” PA-san cheered on.

Seika planted her hand atop of Nijicat’s head, expecting her hand to flare up in rashes or boils or for Nijicat to explode. Of course, all that

happened was Seika feeling the soft sensation of Nijicat's fur and the satisfied meows of said cat.

"Aww. Nijicat likes it!" PA-san squealed.

"Y-yeah. Of course. Heh." Seika smiled.

I can wash my hands later. I'd be lying if I said Nijicat wasn't adorable.

"Just know that I like the original better. My sister. Okay?" Seika said to the cat, continuing to pet the furball.

"Meow!"

"Though you might be more adorable than she is."

"Don't say that to Nijika-chan, Manager." PA-san said, packing away the checkerboard. "I think those two might have some rivalry. And we both know how competitive she can be."

How will Kita and Hitori confront each other now? And who's more adorable between Nijika and Nijicat? Find out (the former) on the finale of Chapter 9!

Nijika and Ryo being wingwomen, despite not knowing anything about love. Truly a Kessoku Band zip tie moment.

The only thing close to a record shop that I've been to is a CD shop with movies. So, yeah. I have no idea what's in them.

I find it realistic for both adults back in Starry to have no idea what to do with a cat. They have jobs and stuff to do. Ain't got time to learn how to pet a cat properly.

I still feel a bit 'ehhhhh' about how I wrote both pairs and their respective 'love convos', but to be honest I always feel similarly whenever I write more serious convos in this.

Finale coming out whenever! Term break just kicked in, so might be able to get it out sooner. MIGHT.

Chapter 9 (Finale: Talk)

Chapter 17: Chapter 9 (Finale: Talk)

The two guitarists talk it out.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

As the two bobbing girls approached a familiar street, they slowed their pace. Nijika and Kita have made another lap around the whole city, occasionally stopping along the way for a break or two. Though the two were absolutely drenched in sweat (Nijika grumbled about not having spare clothes, as she felt her precipitation sticking on her long apparel), they were in high spirits.

“It’s your brain releasing the ‘feel good’ hormone whenever you exercise.” Kita explained, walking beside Nijika.

“Y-yeah. Hoo...” Nijika heaved. “Is that w-why you’re always so bubbly?”

“Hmm. I never thought of it like that!”

The pair continued to make small talk, with dead air filled with Nijika’s panting. That is, until they spotted a familiar feline near the entrance to Starry.

“Nijicat!” Kita exclaimed.

“And... is my sister p-petting it?” Nijika questioned, surprised to see Seika ruffling Nijicat’s head.

“Oh, hey girls.” Seika waved. “Nijicat came out, so I’m here to watch it.”

Kita slipped by Seika's side, giving the cat loads of scratches.

"You know, Nijicat is a stray. You don't need to watch over it." Nijika stated.

"W-well, you never know what might happen around here, Niji." Seika justified. "Dangerous place."

"Riiiiiiight."

You're not fooling anyone, Sis. Especially me.

"Hehe, let's go inside Nijicat?" Kita gestured for the feline to hop into her arms.

The cat refused to budge, meowing in response.

"I think it wants to wait for Ryo, Kita-chan." Nijika said. "Been a while since those two had some time together."

"Ah, ok then. Be good out here, ok?" Kita instructed the cat.

"Meow!"

"Good kitty~"

"Geez Niji, you look horrible. Go shower upstairs." Seika said.

"And you just noticed now..." Nijika deadpanned. "Alright. Oh, Kita-chan. Maybe you'd like to shower too?"

"I'm..."

Kita thought about it.

"... good. Yeah. I'll just shower at, umm, Hitori-chan's house."

"Oh, alright th-wait, what?" / "Whose house now?"

Both sisters responded.

“W-well, me and Hitori-chan actually have a s-sleepover planned today. Hahahaha, y-yeah. S-sorry for not telling you, Nijika-chan. Ehehe...” Kita nervously stuttered.

Nijika caught on to Kita’s plan. She didn’t think she’d be asking Hitori this early.

“Ahh. Ok then! You can wait for her back in Starry, we should have some towels for you to wipe yourself off so that you aren’t... disgusting in front of Bocchi-chan.” Nijika said.

“Wait, Niji, but she can just-”

“Sis, why don’t you be a DEAR and get Kita-chan some TOWELS. OK?” Nijika smiled a bit too widely.

“Erm, ok then.” Seika got weirded out, before disappearing into Starry.

“I got you, Kita-chan. A little bit earlier than I thought, but I trust that you know what you’re doing.” Nijika gave a thumbs up. “Well, I better be off for my shower. Toodles!”

“T-toodles?” Kita waved in confusion as Nijika ran off. “Nijika-chan knows a lot of weird expressions...”

Kita took another look at Nijicat, who was still watching the street in anticipation. Its tail wagged from left to right, in a slow hypnotising rhythm.

Ryo-chan takes good care of Nijicat, huh.

She had to resist the urge to barrage the cat with more pets as she went down the steps into Starry.

The sun layed low on the introverted pair as they ventured back to Starry. The two listened to more songs in the record shop, until the owner suggested they better head home considering how far the shop was to pretty much everything in Shimokitazawa. Ryo and Hitori waddled in silence, enjoying the dusk breeze.

“Y-you remember the way back, right?” Hitori asked.

“Yes. Trust me.” Ryo gave her signature thumbs up.

Hitori sagged just a little.

She has no idea.

Thankfully, Hitori noticed a familiar cat around the corner.

“A-ah, Nijicat.” Hitori pointed in front.

“Oh, my baby. Bocchi, faster. I need to pet my cat.” Ryo demanded, though her voice lacked any authority. “It’ll heal my ankle faster.”

Hitori somewhat sped up their waddle to awkward strides. When the cat came closer into their view, said feline hopped onto Ryo’s shoulder. The poor bassist’s cast was unfortunately used as the cat’s stepping stone, and so Ryo had to hold in her wince.

I’m a big girl. And big girls don’t cry in pain. Especially cool ones.

“Ow.” Ryo reacted.

“Th-that looked like it hurt...” Hitori commented.

“I-I’m good. Though, I might n-need to take Nijicat and get its claws cut.”

“If Nijicat’s h-here, then we should b-be close to Starry!”

Hitori turned the group across the corner to see the entrance of Starry in the distance. She sighed with relief, silently thanking that

she didn't have to do anything drastic. Like call Nijika for help.

"See Bocchi? I knew the way back all along. Trust my impeccable navigation skills." Ryo said, her cat agreeing with a meow.

"B-but, I'm the o-one doing all the work..." Hitori mumbled.

"Onwards. I want to sit down."

"Y-yes, Ryo-san."

The group marched on.

"... you can drop the '-san', Bocchi." Ryo said as Hitori turned to her in surprise. "I think we've known each other long enough not to be that formal."

"A-ah, d-d-did it bother you? S-sorry." Hitori glanced away.

"I'd be lying if I said no. But it's cool. Really, it is Bocchi. Don't wither away from me."

"R-right, Ryo-s-" Hitori stopped herself and her walking. "R... Ryo?"

"Hmm. If it's too awkward for you, 'Ryo-chan' works too. Like how Kita calls me."

"O-ok... Ryo-san..." Hitori mumbled. "Ah, I mean Ryo-chan!"

"Heh, you'll get used to it." Ryo ruffled the pinkhead's hair. "Hey, we're close."

"I can't see..." Hitori blew some of her hair off her face.

"Ryo-chan! Hitori-chan!" Kita's voice rang through the street.

On instinct, both guitarist and bassist winced at Kita's aura as they approached her. Kita was about to hug the both of them, but she stopped herself.

“Hehe, maybe I shouldn’t hug you two. Don’t want to get you guys icky from my sweat!” Kita scratched her cheek.

“W-where’s Nijika-chan?” Hitori asked.

“Oh, she’s taking a shower at her home. Don’t worry, Manager gave me some towels to wipe myself off.”

“I d-don’t think Nijika-chan would mind y-you taking a shower at th-their home. Why d-don’t you shower there?”

“Yeah, Kita. Don’t make no sense.” Ryo added, with Nijicat meowing in tandem.

“W-w-well...” Kita stuttered. “Y-you’re right! But! But. Hehe. I... actually have a sleepover at H-Hitori-chan’s house, so I’m g-gonna shower there. Yeah! Haha! R-r-right, Hitori-chan?”

“Eh?”

“Kita, I was with Bocchi the whole day. If you two actually have one, she would’ve told...” Ryo said, before taking a look at the infinite ire of Kita’s glare. “... ahem, I m-mean, ok. Bocchi, you should’ve told me about this. Bad Bocchi.”

“Ehh?!?”

“Don’t mind Ryo-chan, she’s just teasing.” Kita grabbed. “C’mon, let’s go! I can’t stay stinky forever!”

Hitori was still stunned as she was dragged away from Starry by Kita. Said redhead waved goodbye at Ryo, who responded with a small wave. Of course, Nijicat meowed back, chirpy through the night.

Think Hitori, think! This is probably something Kita-san made up! I never would agree to something like this! I need, like, a few days to prepare myself and the house for minimal boredom and awkwardness. All you got to do is say no, and respectfully decline

her. Think of your family, Hitori. Bringing such a pretty girl in... revealing clothes at night. What would they think?

Hitori looked at Kita.

“K-Kita-san...” Hitori whispered.

“Hmm?” Kita looked back, smiling so sweetly.

C'mon Hitori. Just say no! Just say no! Simple! Just say-

“Hope w-we have fun t-t-tonight...”

...

“Eh, Hitori-chan? I didn't know you were so forward~”

“HUH?”

Hitori turned into concrete, halting Kita from dragging her. While the redhead attempted to desolidify the pinkhead, Hitori had a moment to think.

I didn't mean it like that! Why would Kita-san think that? From me? And so quickly? Wait, maybe it's because she actually likes... me? Nonononono, hold on a minute. Let's not jump to conclusions. Like Ryo-san, I mean Ryo-chan, said. Wait until Kita-san asks me out. If she does. Maybe.

“Hitori-chan, I was kidding!” Kita shook the now-back-to-normal Hitori.

“A-ah, hahahaahahahah!” Hitori awkwardly laughed. “G-good one, Kita-san!”

Kita smiled at the pink goofball in adoration, before quickly turning away.

“W-we should hurry. I still need t-to...” Kita trailed off, nearly fainting on Hitori. Luckily, the guitarist had superb reaction time (whenever someone she cared about was in danger), so she caught the redhead before she hit the ground. With her body.

“Kita-san!” Hitori exclaimed, waving her arms around. She then settled on somewhat hugging Kita.

Kita stirred in Hitori’s arms, furiously blushing upon realisation that she was being hugged by Hitori.

“... s-sorry, Hitori-chan.” Kita mumbled. “Jogging all day took a l-lot out of... me.”

“Ah.” Hitori automatically responded. “D-don’t worry. I can walk the both of us. Already d-did it with Ryo-chan, so...”

“Th-thanks...” Kita barely got out, before snuggling further into Hitori’s tracksuit. She’d apologise for this and ask about the name change for Ryo later; it was really warm in the pinkhead’s arms.

Kita’s blush now spread onto Hitori’s face, but she continued to walk to the train station. The night breeze made the walk more pleasant, and definitely helped with getting rid of the blush on her face.

Even though Kita-san keeps saying how sweaty she is, she doesn’t smell bad. Actually... she doesn’t smell like anything. She smells like air? Does air have a scent? It’s just oxygen and a bunch of other gases, all of which I think are unscented. Remember your chemistry, Hitori. Does air smell like anything?

Hitori shook her head.

Nevermind that. Kita-san needs me. To bring her to my house. To shower. Yeah. Just to shower. Just that. Oh, and she will be sleeping there too. In the same room as I am going to be in. Nothing unusual.

It took all of Hitori’s might not to scream.

“Yahoo~” Nijika yelled as she entered Starry. She just came out of her shower and was feeling fresh. “Anyone home?”

“Glad to see you nice and clean, Niji.” Seika swivelled her stool to see her little sister. “Bad on you for soiling my clothes though.”

“Hey! It was for a great cause!”

“They don’t even fit you, Manager.” PA-san butted in.

“And how do you know that?” Seika turned to her sound engineer, who responded with a cheeky face.

“Yo, Nijika.” Ryo waved, her other hand busy playing with Nijicat. The cat was trying to bite her thumb as it moved across its body.

“Ryo? I thought you’d be home by now. Not that I mind you here.” Nijika shouted as she made herself a glass of pineapple juice. “Sis, why do we still have so much of this stuff?”

“Well-”

“Let me guess.” Nijika cut off her sister. “It was 70% off the whole grocery if you bought some of it.”

“It’s a steal, ok? You like it anyways!”

“Fair, fair. You want any, PA-san?” Nijika offered.

“No thanks.” PA-san declined. “I don’t want any of your weird juice.”

“Ok, weirdo~” Nijika made two cups of pineapple juice and walked over to Ryo’s table. She passed a cup to the bassist as she sat.

“I didn’t ask for one.” Ryo said.

“Thank you, Nijika.’ Oh, you’re welcome!” Nijika mimicked Ryo’s voice.

Ryo took the drink anyway. She was never one to pass a free drink.

“So, why are you still here? I thought you’d be tired from your outing with Bocchi-chan today.” Nijika asked.

“I wanted to spend some time with Nijicat.” Ryo took a big slurp as she fumbled her other hand on Nijicat’s belly, who meowed in glee. “Heh, Nijicat is adorable.”

“Hmm, yeah it is.” Nijika played with Nijicat’s tail. Ryo was glad Nijika warmed up to Nijicat. Maybe they talked it out.

More like Nijika talked with Nijicat. Cats don’t talk.

“I’d be shocked if you told me that Nijicat is a stray. Just look at the floof on this cat!” Nijika yanked Nijicat from Ryo’s hand and held the cat in front of its owner.

“Thanks to me and how well I take care of the furball.” Ryo gloated.

“I’ll let you gloat this one time, Ryo.” Nijika shook her head. If anything were to get to Ryo’s head, Nijicat’s welfare was alright with Nijika.

“You’re not worried you’ll get replaced?” Ryo quipped.

“You wish, blueberry yoghurt.”

“Yoghurt? Really?”

“Might be the pineapple juice.” Nijika took a swig. “Pretty sour.”

Ryo also took a swig, gagging right after.

“Bleh.” Ryo reacted.

“Stop drinking it if you don’t like it.” Nijika said, to which Ryo took another swig and gagged right after.

“Bleh.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“Hey. Rude.”

“You’re rude.”

“Why thank you.”

Nijika snickered.

Both girls played with their cups, deliberating if each should ask the other a certain question.

“So, did Kita ask you about Bocchi?” / “So, did Bocchi-chan ask you about Kita-chan?”

The pair stared at each other.

“Jinx.” / “Jinx!”

Their gazes hardened.

“Double jinx.”

“Double-argh!”

Ryo beat Nijika to the punch.

“You owe me a soda, Nijika.” Ryo smirked.

“No, I don’t! That’s a stupid rule.” Nijika pouted.

Nijicat rubbed its head on Nijika’s hand, as if it was pleading with the blonde to buy the bassist a soda. Even though she absolutely did not deserve one.

...

Okay, maybe just one. Darn you, soft spot for Ryo!

“Fine. Just one.” Nijika gave in. “But it’s for Nijicat. Not you!”

“Cats don’t even drink soda.” Ryo said.

“And so you’ll be drinking it for the cat!”

“Niji, stop being goofy and be honest.” Seika hollered from the bar.
PA-san giggled on the side.

“I-I’m not!”

“Oh, sure you aren’t.” Ryo added. “You’re always goofy. Goofy goober.”

“Why, you!” Nijika swiftly applied a light (hard) chop onto the bassist.

“Oof.”

“Niji, stop being violent.”

“How about you stop being so nitpicky on me, Sis?”

“You’re cute when you’re mad.” Ryo commented.

“Wh-whaugh?” Nijika froze.

“Confusion. I like it, Ryo.” Seika commended.

“Thank you, Manager.” Ryo bowed to Seika. “Does this mean I get a-”

Seika glared.

“Nevermind.”

“It never works, Ryo-chan~” PA-san wistfully said in the background.
“I’ve tried many times~”

“Anyways,” Ryo patted Nijika on the head, unfreezing her. “To answer your question, yes. I suppose you can say the same, hm?”

“Y-yeah. Yeah!” Nijika booted right back up, responding with a nod.

The two shared their own ‘wingwoman’ conversations with their guitarists and the advice they gave them.

“You’re right, that does sound more like a Bocchi issue than a Kita issue.” Ryo agreed when Nijika told her part.

“I know, right? And, now that I think about it, doesn’t Bocchi-chan being unsure of her feelings with Kita-chan sound more fitting for Kita-chan?” Nijika hypothesised.

“Hmm, I don’t think so. Both of them are unsure. Guess it’s normal for romance, or something.”

“Yeah. Hey, who woulda thought we two would be giving romance advice, huh?” Nijika slapped Ryo’s shoulder.

“Heh. Yeah.” Ryo hummed. “Especially since you’re way worse than I am.”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

“Am not.”

“Yes, you are.”

The back and forth continued, until Nijika gave up and faceplanted the table.

“Ok, maybe you are right.”

Ryo fistpumped.

2 - 0. Take that.

Nijika and Ryo continued to drink their pineapple juices, occasionally petting the comfy cat snoozing in the middle of the table.

“So. you two actually made it to the record shop, I assume?” Nijika asked.

“Of course. The lack of faith hurts, Nijika.” Ryo held her hand on her forehead. “The betrayal.”

“Oh, boo hoo. Go cry me a river.”

“First, ouch. Second, I can’t. I’d die of dehydration.”

“I don’t think it’s even humanly possible anyways.”

“Hmm.”

Another thing to search up later.

“Did you and Kita really jog around the whole of Shimokitazawa?” Ryo asked.

“Yeah! Man, that sucked. But, I at least accomplished something!” Nijika beamed. “Praise me, Sis!”

“Good job, Niji.” Seika deadpanned.

Niji is such a goofball sometimes.

“Thank you, Sis! Hehe!”

“You know, you have to do that more regularly if you want to see res-”

“I think I deserve a break! Especially since that was kinda my first time actually exercising.” Nijika cut off her sister.

“Hehe, little Nijika-chan keeps cutting you off, Manager~” PA-san cooed.

“Oh, shut it you. She probably got that from Mom.”

“That’s pretty cool.” Ryo stated.

“You should join us! Ehh, when your ankle gets better.” Nijika said.

“Nuh uh. I don’t want to risk it getting sprained, or twisted, or broken, or stolen, or-”

“Not that soon! Also, stolen?”

“What? There might be some weirdos that want my ankles. They’re very precious.”

“Ryo, I know two weirdos, and neither would ever want your ankles. Or anyone’s ankles for that matter.”

“Hey.” / “Hey!”

Both adults responded to Nijika’s remark.

“Relax, Sis. I mean PA-san and this buffoon.” Nijika jabbed her thumb at Ryo.

“I prefer quirky, but thanks~” / “Aww, shucks. You shouldn’t have.”

PA-san and Ryo said in tandem.

“See, weirdos.” Nijika said.

“Yeah, I get your point.” Seika agreed.

The drummer and bassist continued to chill at their table, while Seika finished up with some remaining work on her laptop. As usual, PA-san scrolled through her phone. Things were going as normal in a late night of an empty Starry.

That is, until Nijika started giggling.

“What’s funny, Nijika?” Ryo asked. “I am funny, but not when I don’t tell a joke.”

Nijika ignored Ryo’s question and began to slowly cackle in abrupt laughter.

“Nijika?”

“Ahahahahaha, hahahaahaha, ahahahaahhah!” Nijika laughed.

“Nijika, tell me what’s so funny.” Ryo grabbed onto the blonde’s shoulders, slightly concerned from her behaviour.

“Hahahahaha, Sans Undertale Kita! Ahahahaahaha!” Nijika fell onto the floor, continuing to laugh her heart out.

“What?”

Is it because Kita is thin?

...

Yeah, that’s the joke.

“Oh my-Nijika, you can’t be serious.” Ryo groaned.

“Hahahahahahaha, ahahaahahah, y-yes I a-am! Ahahahahahahaha!” Nijika somewhat responded, still curled up in a laughing fit.

“S-stop it.” Ryo suppressed her laughter. If she was honest, Nijika’s laughter is infectious. But, she shouldn’t stoop that low. The joke isn’t even that funny.

Hold it together, Ryo. You’ve made funnier jokes.

“Ahahahahaahahahahaahaha!”

... but it is pretty funny.

“Heh. Hehehe, hahahaha.” Ryo laughed, slowly joining Nijika. “W-wait, I can make it better.”

Ryo left the cackling blonde and stumbled into the studio room, grabbing a spare bass guitar. She returned and played four specific notes that made Nijika laugh even harder.

“O-oh my, hahahahaha, g-gosh. I hate y-you! Ahahahahaahahaha!” Nijika barely got out. She was now clutching her stomach.

“Eheheheh.” Ryo did a Sans impression, which made Nijika explode in more laughter, slamming the floor with her fist repeatedly.

“S-stop it! Please! My, haahahaha, stomach can’t handle i-it!” Nijika spoke in between laughter.

“Hahaha, well it’s your fault for, hehehehe, making that stupid joke...” Ryo tried to control her laughter.

“You’re stupid, hahahahahahaha!”

“N-no, you are, hehehehehe.”

Ryo joined Nijika on the floor, both of them laughing and flopping like fish.

“That’s done. Phew, finally. Niji, let’s go-huh?” Seika stretched from her laptop, turning to see her sister and Ryo cackling like maniacs.

“Nijika? Ryo?”

“Hehe, it might be another moment, Manager. Better call Ryo-chan’s parents.” PA-san suggested.

“It can’t be that bad.”

Seika walked over to the bumbling duo, still laughing. She glanced at Nijicat, who was left on the table. It looked at its owner and Nijika,

half-curious and half-disappointed (that's what Seika saw). She pitied the feline.

I'm sorry that she's your owner.

"Niji, Ryo, get off the floor. It's getting l-"

"H-hey, Ryo. I guess you c-can say we're having... a bad time. Ahahahahahahaha!" Nijika joked.

"Hahahahahaha, you are s-so dumb, hehehehehee!" Ryo laughed even harder.

"Ugh." Seika sighed, pulling out her phone.

She shuffled away from the laughing goobers on the floor.

"Hello, Ijichi-san?" Ryo's mother spoke.

"Hi, Miss Yamada. I'm calling to let you know that, umm..." Seika looked back at Ryo, who was making another Sans impression that made Nijika cackle even louder. "Your daughter won't be coming back home."

"Oh, that's fine! My husband and I have a late night shift anyway back in the hospital. We were about to leave. We really appreciate your generosity in taking care of our Ryo!"

"My pleasure."

"But, may I ask, what's the occasion? Ryo hasn't said anything about the band or her special projects."

Seika thought about it. She should just be blunt.

"Ryo and my sister are laughing too hard, on the floor. Here, take a listen." Seika brought her phone closer to the floor duo so that their laughter could reach her phone's microphone.

“Ahh, I-I see.” Ryo’s mother said. “I’m more surprised that this happened a second time. Apologies.”

“No need to apologise. I’m just happy that Niji has such a close friend. Even if, and I’m saying this with all due respect ma’am, they are a goofy pair.”

“Oh, that sounds like my Ryo!”

“Hehe, yeah. Well, I have my sister and your daughter to take care of now. Thank you for your kindness, Miss Yamada.”

“I should be saying that to you! Good night to you all!”

“Night ma’am.” Seika hung up the call, sighing upon realising that she’ll have to drag the both of them to the apartment.

“Want me to help?” PA-san offered. “Been a while since I visited your place too.”

“Sure. Thanks.” Seika cracked her knuckles. “Dibs on my sister though. Ryo’s heavy.”

“Don’t say that, Manager~”

“You can handle Ryo’s ankle too?”

“I’ll try.”

With the combined effort of the two adults, they barely got ahold of the laughing pair. Though they wouldn’t stay still, both adults were able to somewhat haul them out of Starry.

“Oh, Nijicat. I guess you can follow us back home.” Seika’s face crinkled under her masks, still keeping her tight grip on the giggling Nijika.

Nijicat meowed in response.

“Good kitty.”

“So, have you been taking care of that plant I gifted you last year?” PA-san asked, keeping the squirming Ryo still. She made sure to be extra careful of Ryo’s ankle, though said girl’s laughter was not helping.

“Uhh, I think we’ll both find out once we get home.”

Kita slowly fluttered her eyes open, realising that she fell asleep in Hitori’s arms at some point. Ignoring the thought of being in Hitori’s arms (it took a lot of her willpower not to squeal at the thought), she found that it wasn’t ideal for her to lose consciousness. She was planning on just asking Hitori while they walked to the train station, using the supposed ‘sleepover’ as an excuse to be alone with the pinkhead. She thought that she could channel her inner energy to keep herself awake, but even the adrenaline after her jog wasn’t enough. Worst case scenario if she talked with Hitori by the train station, she’d just go back home and shower. She really didn’t think she’d be actually going to Hitori’s house. She worried that if things went south, she’d get kicked out of their home, having to sleep on the streets and-

What am I thinking, of course they wouldn’t! The Gotohs are nice! Come on, Kita! Just go to her home, shower, ask her if she wants to be my g-girlfriend or something, and accept whatever she says. And then sleep with her-no, not like that brain! Yeah, I can do it.

Kita yawned and felt something keeping her still. She swiveled her head around to notice that they were already on the train and that her head was still wrapped around Hitori’s arms.

“A-ah, Kita-san. You’re awake.” Hitori smiled at the redhead. “I-I didn’t mean to keep hugging y-you like this! If you want, I can s-stop! Like, right n-n-now!”

“... hi Hitori-chan.” Kita hummed into Hitori’s arm, thankful that her arms covered most of her blush. “Y-you can let go. Don’t want to soil your clothes.”

“O-ok.”

Hitori unwrapped her arms around the redhead, sighing in relief. Hugging someone for that long made her arms ache. Looking back at Kita, Hitori saw how tired she was. Her hair was slightly ruffled from Hitori’s hug, her posture was struggling to stay upright, and Kita’s smile was small. Her blinking was slow, as if she were rationing how many times she could blink before she collapsed in exhaustion. The redhead rubbed her eyes, trying her best to stay awake.

“S-sorry Hitori-chan, but I did want to ask you something.” Kita spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. “W-well, more like talk with y-you about something. But... I don’t think I can a-ask it yet. Not until after my shower!”

“Ah, o-ok. I c-can wait.” Hitori nodded.

“Th... thanks.”

The two sat in silence, letting the rustling and jostling of the train fill in instead. Without much thought, Kita scooted over near Hitori to lay her head on Hitori’s shoulder, who didn’t seem to mind. On a normal day, Kita would be spouting about an endless amount of topics, keeping a conversation between the two guitarists afloat. However, with Kita too tired and Hitori trying her best not to look too shaken by the sudden sleepover, the two silently agreed to remain silent, giving a much needed reprieve for the both of them; physically for Kita and mentally for Hitori. Well, keeping her physical form intact was part of that too.

“Oh my gosh, are you two ok?”

“You girls aren’t hurt, no?”

“Hey look, it’s Kita-chan! She looks awful!”

“Bark, bark!”

Upon Hitori’s return to her abode, she was bombarded with her whole family greeting her with questions. Though it was normal for the pinkhead to return home at a late hour, they were more concerned with the sleepy redhead behind Hitori.

“W-we’re fine guys. Kita-san will be staying here, if that’s alright?” Hitori half-stated, half-asked.

“Well, I don’t see a problem with her sleeping here for the night.” Hitori’s mother gleefully said.

“Mhmm. A friend of Hitori’s is a friend of the Gotoh family!” Hitori’s dad exclaimed.

“Haha, yeah!” Futari agreed.

“Bark!” Jimihen also agreed.

“G-guys...” Hitori felt the urge to shrink, were it not for the hiding redhead behind her.

“S-sorry you all have to see me like this.” Kita stepped beside Hitori to bow. “I went jogging today and thought that it wouldn’t be this tiring, but...”

“It’s ok, Kita-san. I’ll get an extra futon ready. Please, make yourself at home!” Hitori’s mother ushered them in, disappearing into the house.

“Thank you all for your kindness!” Kita thanked, her aura not as bright as usual. “Oh, and sorry Futari-chan. I don’t think I can play with you tonight. Kita-chan is tired.”

“That’s ok, Kita-chan!” The little pinkhead said. “I know onee-chan is just going to keep you all to herself anyways!”

“F-Futari! No!” Hitori shouted at her little sister. “Mmmmm...”

Kita giggled. It was always cute to see their sisterly bond. Even if it was more like a power struggle than sibling love.

The gremlin stuck her tongue out at her sister before beckoning Jimihen to follow her upstairs.

“Oh, Futari?” Hitori called.

“Yeah, onee-chan?”

“Can you get some t-towels for Kita-san? She’ll be using the shower.”

“Gotcha!”

The steps of Futari grew quieter as she ran off with Jimihen. Hitori sighed. As much as a pain that is her younger sister, she still is a delight to have. She silently thanked her parents for managing to keep Futari under control. Most of the time.

“Oh, i-if that’s ok with you, D-Dad.” Hitori craned her head towards her father.

“Hahaha, of course. It’s cool.” Hitori’s father chuckled. “You should go ahead, Kita-san. I just have something to talk about with my daughter.”

“Oh, ok. Thank you again for your kindness!” Kita bowed before scurrying up to Hitori’s bedroom.

Hitori felt herself sweat as she realised that her father singled her out. To talk about... something.

*Oh no, is this the time where I'll be interrogated? Since I brought such a pretty girl in somewhat revealing clothes at night?
Nononononono!*

"I w-wasn't going to do anything bad with Kita-san, I swear Dad!" Hitori knelt on the ground to fully bow before her father. She only looked back up when she heard her father laugh.

"Of course you would think that. Don't worry, Hitori. You're alright. If anything, you should give yourself a pat on the back for offering Kita-san a place to stay and shower." Hitori's dad explained.

"Oh. Hehe, ehehehe, thanks Dad." Hitori giggled as she stood back up. "B-but, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well, call it a hunch. Or a gut feeling. But, I think you two are going to have some serious talk. Y'know, real serious stuff."

"H-how come?"

"Hitori, she could've asked you to bring her to her home instead of here. She chose to come here."

"O-oh, r-r-right."

"I know you'll be fine. You two are pretty close. Be honest with her. Just... try not to scream, ok? Or overreact."

"Eh?"

"It's pretty late at night, you might disturb the neighbours."

"Ehh??"

Is that really it? He just wanted to say that?

"A-alright, you can go." Hitori's dad lightly shoved her daughter up the stairs. "Go get her! Or something!"

“Ehhh???” Hitori uttered in confusion.

Oh my gosh, was my dad trying to give love advice?

Hitori cringed hard upon realisation that yes, her dad was trying to pep-talk her daughter before she talked with Kita.

“Hahahahahaha, I’m doomed.” Hitori whispered to herself, crashing onto her futon.

“Hitori~” Hitori’s mother appeared in the bedroom. “You could help me with preparing your bedroom.”

“Ah, ok Mom.”

How did Mom ever fall for someone like Dad?

Meanwhile, Kita was basking in the hot water from the shower. She grabbed a pair of pyjamas with the help of Hitori’s mom, though she felt that they were a tad bit too big for her. Probably to compensate for Hitori’s... chest. The water was invigorating, even just a slight bit for the redhead, as she felt her energy return while the disgusting sweat that stuck to her eroded away. She checked to see if Hitori really did use only shampoo for her hair, and that seemed to be true. Her bathroom was void of any conditioners, hair treatment devices and such. It really was in her genetics then.

She didn’t bring a toothbrush, so she gargled some of their mouthwash. She slipped on the pyjamas, finding that they were indeed a bit too big for her, but she wasn’t going to complain. In fact, it was a lot more comfy wearing a bit more baggy clothing. Maybe Nijika had a point with long clothes.

No wonder all of her indoor clothes are long! Nijika-chan must be pretty comfy at home.

Feeling fresh, clean and ready to talk with Hitori, she tiptoed near Hitori’s bedroom. Popping her head through the door, she saw that

the room was mostly the same as the last time she had a sleepover at Hitori's. She was a little disappointed that Hitori didn't at least try to put up 'something youthful', but she preferred the plain room to whatever Hitori conjured up on her first visit.

She also found a pink slug plush, resting on a futon. Besides that was another futon, probably where she'll be sleeping.

"Hitori-chan?" Kita asked. She didn't think that Hitori had a pink plushie before. Maybe she's too shy to talk about it.

"H-hi, Kita-san." The slug spoke.

Kita had to stifle a scream.

"S-sorry, I was just. Umm..." Hitori unbundled herself back to normal. "... slugging a-around? Hahaha..."

"Pfft, oh you." Kita giggled, putting her dirty clothes in her bag. She was grateful that it was a Saturday tomorrow, not having to worry about going to school. "Hope you don't mind my messy hair. Didn't bring a comb."

"N-not at all." Hitori waved her hands. "It kind of s-suits you."

"Hehe, thanks."

Kita pulled out her phone to text her parents, explaining what happened and what led her to stay at Hitori's place. Though the received texts weren't as savoury as she would like (her father later privately messaged her that everything's ok and that her mother was just being stingy), they were glad to hear that she was safe. Kita had to tell them not to prepare any gifts as thanks to the Gotohs for taking care of her; it really wasn't necessary.

"Reminds me of l-last time we did this." Hitori reminisced.

"Hmm?" Kita hummed, putting her phone away next to her futon. "Like, our last sleepover here?"

“Mhmm. Didn’t think I’d be hosting a sleepover twice, let a-alone ever.”

“There’s a first for everything, Hitori-chan.”

Hitori froze.

What does she mean by-

“Oh my gosh, Hitori-chaaaaaan. Get your mind out of the gutter.”
Kita playfully shook Hitori. “I’m not like that.”

“Ah, I’m sorry f-f-for assuming that! P-please, we can h-have our futons as far away as p-possible! I respect you and your b-b-body, Kita-san!” Hitori bowed to Kita, who giggled at the sight.

“It’s ok, Hitori-chan. I don’t mind us sleeping close to each other. Besides, bit unrealistic to assume that you’d do something that bad to me.”

“W-w-well, I! Uhh, y-you! Yeah...”

“Hehe! You’re too sweet and caring and thoughtful and more!”

“Awawawawawawa...”

Kita sighed. Probably not the best start. She decided to reset.

“Ok, but I do want to talk to you about... s-something. Hitori-chan.”
Kita twiddled with her hair as she waited for Hitori to come back.

As if on cue, Hitori popped back to normal.

“Oh, s-sure! Wh-what’s on your mind, Kita-san?” Hitori asked.

Kita took a deep breath. Unlike last time she seriously talked with Hitori, she had no help (specifically, from a certain feline). It was only her and Hitori in the room. She now admits that she probably

could've done this on a better day, when she wasn't so tired. But, she was here now. She had to speak.

Now if only her heart could calm down a little bit.

I guess I could start with...

"It is a little nostalgic, you and I being here. When I came here before, I wanted to know you better so that I could sing the lyrics you wrote." Kita spoke, a little shaky from her heart doing all sorts of gymnastics in her chest. She couldn't speak directly to the pinkhead - at least, not yet. So, she spoke to the window, allowing the moonlight to illuminate her face. Hitori, knowing that it was taking so much for her to speak, kept silent, giving Kita her full attention.

"But, in the end, I realised that I already kinda knew you well. It also made me realise how... committed you are to the band, compared to me. It really made me feel lesser. Inadequate. Heh, big word."

Hitori had flashbacks to that one day, where Kita wasn't feeling so well.

"Thanks to you, Hitori-chan, I'm not as hard on myself as I was before. I know that I still have room to grow, and I'll continue to practise to get to your level. But, that's besides the point."

Kita cleared her throat.

"I don't know if it was on that sleepover, or the festival, or later, but I realised that I really do a-admire you. Your skill, your determination, your sweetness. I look up to you, Hitori-chan. You're a big inspiration for me. I know I've probably said all this before, but I just wanted to make it clear! Being honest, I don't know all the struggles you go through, and yet you still have the perseverance to continue. If someone like you can shred so hard on the guitar, then maybe I can too."

Kita now had a red storm on her face. She slapped her cheeks lightly.

“And th-that’s why I... w-why I... why I-I...”

Kita learned to expect the unexpected with the girl Hitori Gotoh. Said pinkhead was prone to shapeshifting, phasing in and out of reality at times or disintegrating into fine dust at other times. It was a spectacle whenever she did it, though saying that to Hitori would probably make her do it more often. Kita got better with dealing with these ‘Bocchi Time’ moments; after all, she spent so much time with the guitarist, she’d be ashamed if she wasn’t proficient in bringing Hitori back to Earth.

And so, Kita was used to Hitori surprising her, intentionally or not. Her heart almost exploded when she heard Hitori finish her sentence.

“L-love you?”

Kita might have had a heart attack, as she fell face-first into her futon.

“K-Kita-san? Kita-san???” Hitori scrambled to the redhead.

“... I’m fhish, Hihtorih-chah...” Kita mumbled. “Mmmmm...”

Hitori was at a loss for words. For one, she got confirmation that indeed the redhead liked Hitori. She was still getting over that. Though she always had a feeling that Kita liked her, with everything good in her life she was sceptical; hence, her talk with Ryo about the matter. Second, how was her talk with her father less helpful than her talk with Ryo? Sure, her father only talked with her for a solid minute, but if she was being honest, his ‘advice’ was more like a pat on the back than actual advice. Third, Kita liked her. Like, **liked** liked.

Hitori refrained from slamming her head onto the futon.

She was happy that Kita really enjoyed her company, and though she felt uneasy that someone as bright, cheery and joyful as her looks up to someone like her, she would be lying if she said that she didn't like it. Like she told Ryo, Kita saw the diamond in the rough in Hitori, and she felt giddy knowing that that diamond has worth to someone she cares for deeply.

However, did she love Kita back? She loved all of her friends, but not in a romantic way. She didn't even know how to love someone romantically, aside from all of the dumb crushes she had on fictional anime characters back in middle school - Hitori was pretty sure they didn't count. She thought about harems and having all of the band members as girlfriends (with a big IF above the thought), but according to scholarly research - that is, bingeing as many harem anime as she could - all of them seem to end quite bitterly. The thought of being in a relationship not only brought a myriad of youth complex triggers, but also more things to worry about. How would things be different? How often did she have to show affection to Kita? Would the other two be bothered by the both of them? What would happen if they broke up? She couldn't help but worry, which would definitely sour the relationship.

Yet, she realised she liked being close with Kita. She liked whenever Kita would push her out of her comfort zone, and still kept her close enough to pull her back into comfort. She liked how joyful Kita is, with her mere presence bringing joy to Hitori. She liked how she found Hitori funny, even if what she did was goofy. She liked how Kita relies on her, just as Hitori relies on Kita. Getting used to her physical affection is still a work in progress (Kita is a very touchy-feely person), but Hitori really liked it all. And now that she thought about it, Kita was much more affectionate with her compared to the other bandmates.

So Hitori decided. She likes Kita, but she... probably doesn't love her? That struck a chord in her, like what she thought was cosmically wrong. She felt that any higher being out there will have her head

one of these days for thinking such a preposterous thought. But, it is how she feels.

“Be honest with her and tell her how you feel. Even if it isn’t a yes, or it’s a maybe. She’ll understand, Bocchi.” Ryo’s words rang through her head.

She just had to tell her. Now if only her heart could stop trying to escape her ribcage.

“Kita-san?” Hitori poked the lump of red. Kita murmured, thankfully still awake. Barely.

“I... ah, I...”

Hitori couldn’t say it. The pressure of not messing up kept her vocal chords shut.

I can’t mess this up! Kita-san might take it the wrong way, and then she’ll hate me. I’ll ruin our friendship! And then, I’ll get kicked out of the band! That can’t happen! But if I don’t say anything, then Kita-san will fall asleep. And then, tomorrow will be so awkward, I might actually pass away from it! She poured her heart out to me, and I just don’t say anything about it? What kind of friend would I be?

Worse, she had no help. No friend to call, nobody to tag-team with her, not one person she could pass the baton to. She didn’t even have Nijicat or Jimihen to calm herself down.

Hitori clutched her head. She couldn’t do it. She was going to mess up.

...

Until, she glanced at her guitar case.

“G-g-give me a s-sec, Kita-san.” Hitori said, patting Kita on the head. “P-please, stay aw-awake...”

“Mmmmm...” Kita hummed, still not facing Hitori.

Kita heard some rustling and a zipper, which finally made her glance at Hitori. She sat right up (as best as she could anyways), seeing that the pinkhead pulled out her guitar to play. She knew what this meant.

Hitori ignored the out-of-tune strings and how awfully worse her guitar sounded without an amp, playing whatever string of chords came to mind. She could already feel her heartbeat return to normal, and her ragged breathing she only noticed now smoothened out.

She continued to play, the notes barely ringing out through the room. Without much thought, Kita swayed to the rhythm, enjoying the melody even as soft as it is. She knew that music was how Hitori expressed herself, and she felt as if she was whispering to her. So, she hung onto every strum, every note and every chord Hitori played.

Finally (somewhat) ready, Hitori spoke.

“I-I’m not g-good with words, esp-especially being put on the spot I-like this. I’m also n-not really good with ex-expressing my f-feelings with other p-people.”

Hitori sighed. Not a good start to put herself down like that.

“But th-that’s besides the point. I’m... happy. Happy to have met all of you. A-and, I c-cannot imagine what my life would b-be like without all of you. Th-that’s how much you all mean to me.”

Hitori looked Kita in the eyes, the redhead stunned by the sudden eye contact.

“I’m happy that you see a lot in me. Even if I myself s-struggle to see any of that, y-y’know with how I am and st-stuff.”

Hitori averted her gaze back to her guitar. She needed to be stable. Secure. She needed to get her point across to Kita.

“A-and I’m glad you somehow are able t-to l-l-l... love me. Past me would n-never have thought this ever happening, heh.”

Hitori paused her playing.

“But I’m not s-sure if I love y-you b-b-back.”

Hitori continued.

“You, Nijika-chan and Ryo-chan are all my first e-ever friends. Genuine friends. Sometimes I pinch my-myself to see if I’m just dr-dreaming, but no. You’re all real. And you all like me. Hehe, ehehehe, ahem.”

Hitori shook her head. Now’s not the time to lose herself in praise, especially coming from herself. Kita giggled at the gesture.

“D-d-don’t get me wrong! I d-don’t like you less. I just... can’t say if I love you or n-not. Everything’s so n-new to me, Kita-san. And...”

Hitori started to choke up, stray tears telling her that she’s close to crying. It was getting harder to focus on playing too. But, she kept on going.

“I d-don’t want to ruin what we have. I like how you sh-show so many new things to me. I like how you and Nijika-chan al-always push me enough to come o-out of my sh-shell. I like how w-warm you feel when y-you’re around me.”

Hitori sniffed. She probably looked horrible right now in front of Kita. But she wasn’t done.

“But, I’m s-sorry Kita-san! I th-think I only l-love you as a f-f-friend... sorry... sorry...”

Hitori somehow finished her impromptu song, continuing to mumble apology after apology to Kita. She hung her head low, not sure whether in shame or in embarrassment. She felt like she just committed a crime, the most heinous of them all.

Is this what it's like to reject someone?

Hitori suddenly felt the weight of her guitar missing, slowly looking back up. She saw Kita placing her guitar back on its stand, with small tears escaping her emerald eyes as they glistened in the moonlight. Though Hitori's eyes were a bit blurry, she could see that Kita was blushing too, giving her a small smile.

"Oh, Hitori-chan..." Kita whispered, before tackling Hitori in the tightest hug she's ever gotten in her life. "Hitori-chan..."

They stay like that for a while, keeping their embrace tight. Hitori wasn't bothered by how Kita's arms were starting to dig into her skin. Though she would never admit it to a soul, she needed this hug.

"I don't hate you for rejecting me." Kita said, rubbing small circles on Hitori's back. Just as she did to her before. "I can never hate you, Hitori-chan."

"H-huh?" Hitori squeaked.

"Thank you for being honest with me. I've... had fears that you would go with this and become m-my g-girlfriend, only because I asked you out. Not out of love or something like that."

Kita ended the hug, getting a good look at Hitori. She saw how scared Hitori was, slightly trembling. Being honest took everything that Hitori has got. Kita's heart ached at the sight.

"I'm fine with us staying as friends, Hitori-chan. Really. I am. We're close enough anyways, asking for more is a bit selfish, hehe."

Kita tried to get Hitori to look at her, but she kept turning her head away.

“Hitori-chan. Please. I’m not mad. Maybe a little bit sniffly, but I’m not mad.” Kita sniffed.

Hitori squirmed.

“Please.”

Eventually, Hitori looked into emerald eyes, still having tears seeping out.

“See? That wasn’t so hard. I’m not mad at you. You’re fine-Hitori-chan?”

Kita suddenly got assaulted by the pinkhead, wrapping her in another hug. Her arms were stuck in Hitori’s embrace, so she sat there as Hitori continued to hug her.

“... th-thank you.” Hitori sobbed.

Kita remained silent as she allowed Hitori to hug her for as long as she liked. The soft sobs of Hitori slowly died out, and her breathing returned to a normal rhythm. Kita could even feel the pinkhead’s heart slow down.

She did feel a little awkward not hugging her back.

“Ah, s-sorry.” Hitori released Kita from her embrace. “S-s-sorry if that was a b-bit too long...”

“It’s ok, Hitori-chan. You really need that.” Kita smiled. “If you need a hug, I’m always here.”

“Th-thanks. I guess that m-m-makes us guitar sisters, K... Kita-chan!”

Kita's eyes widened in awe. She couldn't help hugging her again, falling onto the futons from excitement.

"Hehe, yay!" Kita giggled as they both laid on the beds.

"Kita-san, I mean Kita-chan?" Hitori softly shrieked in horror. She was pushing her limit on how many hugs she could give and take.

"Sorry, Hitori-chan. But, you're so huggable. And you give good hugs too!"

"O-oh. Hehehehehehehe, eheheh..." Hitori began to giggle to herself.

"We should probably go to bed. I'm still really tired."

"Eheheheheh-ah. Y-yes."

With Hitori now enjoying her newfound freedom from the prison of Kita, the two settled into their futons.

Kita was content. No girlfriend, but her friendship with her guitar sensei and adorable goofball was secured, if not strengthened. Said goofball was even open to being 'guitar sisters', which though was something Kita kind of threw out there, she was glad to see the pinkhead grow closer with her. The band remains the same, and all is well.

"Goodnight, Hitori-chan!"

Hitori was happy. Happy to know that she is not hated for how she feels, and her friendship with her direct opposite grew closer. She still felt sour after her rejection, but with Kita's response, Hitori feels like she's done the right thing. She has her friends, and her friends have her.

"Goodnight... Kita-chan."

The two guitar sisters slept peacefully that night, the moon waning in the skies as witness of their unusual, yet unrelenting bond.

That concludes Chapter 9. Well, there's actually more, but I really wanted to get this out sooner, and seeing as the additional stuff was getting longer and longer, I decided to leave the main stuff off at a good conclusion. Tune in for the aftermath soon!

EDIT: Ok, so the aftermath is taking a bit longer than I thought. Might be longer than soon for it to come out.

Sans Undertale Kita. Laugh.

So, yes. BoatKitchen is platonic, not romantic. If you squint your eyes though, they're basically a couple. Win win?

The Gotoh family is fun to write. Having Hitori's dad be awful at giving love advice or pep-talks seems in character to me.

I have a feeling this might've been the longest chapter thing I've written. Maybe it isn't, too lazy to check. Hopefully this has been worth the wait (idk, I felt like it's been ages since I posted).

Chapter 9: Aftermath

Chapter 18: Chapter 9: Aftermath

The band reunites for another day.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The first thing Kita noticed when waking up was that her bedroom smells different. She couldn't identify what, but she smelled a hint of mothballs. And dust? The grogginess of the morning wore away and she remembered that she was in Hitori's bedroom.

Right, she confessed to Hitori and instead of getting a girlfriend, she got a guitar sister. Some may say it's a downgrade, but Kita is glad to be close with Hitori. It was a privilege in Kita's eyes to be valued and relied on by the 'sometimes-a-pink-slug-or-dust-or-eldritch-being' Hitori.

She got up to do her usual routine of stretching (she forgot to do them yesterday, so her body ached like crazy) when she found herself unable to move. Actually, she couldn't really see anything, except the pyjamas of a certain pinkhead.

Must've hugged Hitori-chan while I slept. I just can't help myself, even when I'm unconscious!

Her arms were stuck hugging Hitori, so she had no choice but to wake the girl up to get her stretches. As much as she didn't want to awake Hitori from her slumber (Kita was aware of how little sleep Hitori sometimes gets), she really needed to stretch her limbs. She couldn't tell whether them being on fire or swatted by bees was a better description.

Kita struggled, to no avail.

I'd be complaining more, if Hitori-chan wasn't so soft. And cuddly!

"Hitori~" Hitori's mother sang. "We can't have you sleeping all day now. You have work!"

Hitori's mother slid open the door, immediately noticing the redhead cuddling with her daughter. She giggled, alerting Kita of her presence, who blushed upon being found out.

"H-hi, Miss Gotoh..." Kita mumbled. "Sorry for, uhh, th-this..."

"Oh, that's ok. Hitori's too old for me to give her hugs like that, and she can really use the physical affection." Hitori's mother smiled. "Don't spoil her too much~"

"M-Miss Gotoh??"

"Hehe!"

Kita buried her head into Hitori, wanting to escape from reality badly.

"You two should get up soon. Breakfast is about to be ready, and my husband cooks really good scrambled eggs!" Hitori's mother offered.

"Will do! Thank you Miss Gotoh!" Kita tried to bow.

"Although, from the looks of things, you two will be staying in bed for a little while longer."

"Miss Gotoh..."

"Oh, Futari might come by to wake up Hitori. You don't mind her doing that?"

"N-not at all. I'm, hnng, urk! I'm kind of stuck here."

"Alright. Enjoy~" Hitori's mother disappeared into the house.

Kita sighed. She was glad to not have to endure more of Hitori's mother's teasing, somewhat thankful that her and Hitori are staying as friends. If they were girlfriends, who knows how much teasing she'd have to deal with. On a daily basis, probably.

Oh, right. She had to stretch. Her limbs were not happy.

"Kita-chan! Hitori! Wake up!" Thankfully, Futari spawned into the room, with Jimihen coming around the corner.

"Hi Futari-chan!" Kita greeted the little pinkhead. "Mind waking up your sister for me? Kita-chan needs to stretch her arms and legs."

"Sure thing!" Futari walked over to her sister, kneading Hitori's face with her hands. "Onee-chaaaaaaaan! Get up! Kita-chan needs to stretch!"

"Mmmm..." Hitori barely registered her face being modified. "Five more minutes, Futari..."

"Onee-chaaaaaaaan! Ugh! Jimihen, help please?"

The dog barked, waddling over to Hitori's face. Jimihen proceeded to lick Hitori, stirring her from her peaceful slumber.

"Okay, okay, haha, I'll get up." Hitori protested, lightly pushing the dog back to Futari. "H-huh? Futari, is th-there something on me?"

"Oh, that's just Kita-chan." Futari pointed to the redhead, still clinging onto Hitori.

"H-hi Hitori-chan. G-good morning!" Kita smiled.

"Good morning, K-Kita-chan..."

The guitarist pair detached, the redhead finally able to stretch her limbs out while the pinkhead cleaned the futons. Both girls were tomato-faced, which made Futari giggle.

“Ahh, that feels better!” Kita stretched. “Let’s get some breakfast, guys?”

“Yay! Dad always makes the best breakfast, Kita-chan!” Futari exclaimed, dashing down to the living room.

“Hehe, so I’ve heard Futari-chan. Hitori-chan, let’s go?”

Hitori looked up at Kita. Despite what happened yesterday, nothing’s changed. And Hitori couldn’t ask for anything more.

“A-ah, yes.”

The Gotohs, plus Kita, had breakfast, with Hitori’s father cooking a little bit too much food.

“Sorry, Kita-san. I thought that you were a big eater, considering you do go out a lot.” Hitori’s father said.

“Oh, I am! Well, I’m trying to be.” Kita gleefully said, adding another egg on her full plate. She had to explain her family’s history of metabolism shortly after.

The eventual topic of what happened last night did come up, which made Hitori freeze up in embarrassment and fear. Thankfully, Kita managed to explain the main reason for her visit, knowing that she could trust Hitori’s parents. They were glad that the two were able to retain their friendship.

“Kita-chan, you may be her guitar sister, but I’m her REAL sister. Hehe!” Futari boldly proclaimed.

“Oh, it’s not a competition, Futari-chan. But, you’re going to have to try harder than that to beat me!” Kita teased.

“G-guys...” Hitori tried to stop the budding rivalry, but it was too late. She could already see the sparks in both of their eyes as they stared

at each other.

The parents could only laugh at the sight. It was warming to see Kita fit in so well.

With a heavy breakfast now finished, the guitarist pair headed back to Hitori's bedroom. Nijika texted them for practice today, and with Kita needing to go back home to grab her guitar, they needed to leave soon. Though Hitori protested, she took a shower.

"Hitori, we can't let you stink up that livehouse now. Don't be lazy just because it's the weekend." Hitori's mother sternly said.

"Moooooooooon..." Hitori groaned. "Not in front of K-Kita-chan..."

Kita was glad she could see this side of Hitori. Home Hitori. Has a nice ring to it.

While the pinkhead showered, Kita got her belongings ready. She didn't bring much, just her bag with her jogging clothes and school uniform, which she was going to wear until she got back home. She was thankful she always brought plastic bags with her, so her school uniform wasn't too soiled. With nothing to do, the redhead explored Hitori's room. She didn't really have time to take in her surroundings when she arrived. It was still the same old room she saw the last time she was here, though Kita was fine with the familiarity.

She did check the closet, sighing in relief that their promotional photo of the band wasn't plastered all over the walls. She did find the photo, sitting over a bunch of recording equipment that Hitori hadn't cleaned up. She knew that this space was where Hitori honed her craft for six years, taking the time and effort to get as good as she is now.

One day, I'll reach her heights. But for now, I'll settle with supporting the band, and supporting Hitori-chan.

After Hitori's shower and waving goodbye to the Gotohs, the two set off to Starry.

"Your family is so nice to be with, Hitori-chan!" Kita said.

"Heh, y-yeah." Hitori said. "... don't b-be too jealous now."

"Wha-hey! Where did this come from?"

"I d-don't know. Maybe I was al-always this s-sassy? Y-yeah! Kita-chan."

"Orrrrrr, it's because you slept like a baby in my arms~"

"N-n-n-no!"

"YOU don't get too jealous now."

"Kita-chan!"

Kita and Hitori took the first train to Shimokitazawa. Kita had to push Hitori into the train car, who was still covering her blushing face from Kita's last comment. The two settled in their seats, glad that the morning meant more vacant seats. Kita hummed to herself as she rocked back and forth, while Hitori scrolled through her phone. She saw some messages that she missed from the Kessoku Band group chat.

"@everyone, reminder again! Don't forget we have band practice today! Yesterday was supposed to be a break, so let's do our best today!"

"roger that, boss"

"Ryo, you don't need to say that. You're literally next to me as I type."

"ok miss killjoy"

Hitori then saw a picture of Nijika and Ryo in Nijika's bedroom, with the blonde giving a headlock to the bassist. Seems they too also had their own sleepover.

"@GotoHito, how's Kita-chan btw?"

Hitori typed, "She's fine. She's with me going to Starry. She's going to have to go back home for her guitar though."

"woah, that's a lot of she's"

"Quiet you."

"hey, you know I'm right here Hitori-chan!"

"GAH!" Hitori screamed, looking over her shoulder to see Kita peering at her phone, with her own phone in her hands.

Both of their phones pinged with the other duo's reactions.

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

"lol"

"Alright, we'll see you two later. Ciao!"

"nijika owes me a soda"

"See you two then."

Hitori closed her phone. Their stop was near.

“You s-sure you don’t want m-me to accompany you back h-home?” Hitori asked.

“No need! Besides, with all that happened yesterday, I really do want to get back to playing with you all.” Kita turned down Hitori’s offer.

“Oh, ok.”

Upon arriving at their stop, the two guitarists hopped off the train. They bid each other farewell, Kita giving a short hug to Hitori. Hitori watched as Kita dashed off, her smile since leaving the house still on her.

“I bet a 1000 yen that the two lovebirds are a couple now.”

“Ryo, I’m not betting on their relationship.”

Nijika and Ryo were hanging out by a nearby vending machine. Nijika still owed Ryo a soda, after all.

“What money do you have to bet with anyways?” Nijika handed Ryo her soda.

“Umm, lemme see...” Ryo ruffled her hand in her pocket. “Like 120 yen.”

“You can barely buy a drink with that!”

“It’s the thought that counts.”

“Yeah right!”

The two set off to Starry.

“So, how’s your ankle holding up?” Nijika asked.

“And you ask now?” Ryo shot.

“Hey, wasn’t my fault you were already at our dining table when I woke up!”

“What can I say? I like your cooking.”

“That’s besides the point.”

“It’s doing much better. I think I can try to walk without these crutches next week. Parents will help me with that. Can’t wait to get out of this cast.”

“Good thing your parents are both doctors.”

“Mmm.”

Ryo slurped.

“Do you have to drink so loudly?” Nijika complained.

In response, Ryo slurped harder.

“Ugh, you.”

The view of Starry appeared in their sight, with a familiar cat waiting by the entrance.

“Hey, Nijicat.” Ryo said, allowing Nijicat to hop onto her shoulder.

“Good kitty.”

“I will never understand how Nijicat just... appears when it’s needed.” Nijika shook her head, putting on a mask. “Or, I dunno, it just appears.”

“Some things are better left unexplained. Like Bocchi.”

“Hah! Don’t say that to her.”

“Maybe I should start a documentary series on her. Call it: ‘The Unknown Side of Bocchi’”

“Oh my gosh, she’s not an animal Ryo! Though, I would watch that if it ever came out.”

“See? Enticing.”

Nijika pulled out the keys to Starry’s entrance when she found the door unlocked.

“Did PA-San come in early?” Nijika asked as she pushed the door open.

The duo and Nijicat entered an empty Starry, finding PA-san in her natural habitat.

“Hey you two~” PA-san waved. “Sorry for not telling you, but I came in early.”

“Excited for work much?” Ryo asked.

“I would be if she gave me a raise. Don’t tell Manager that, Nijika-chan.”

“If I did, you’d probably get fired.” Nijika deadpanned.

“All the more reason not to tell~ By the way, where’s your sister, Nijika-chan?”

“She’s still back at our place.” Nijika explained. “Recovering from our... umm, incident.”

“She was still shaking while we ate breakfast.” Ryo nodded. “It was kind of funny. And sad.”

“H-how long were you guys laughing?” PA-san asked, a little horrified.

“It’s... better if we don’t tell you. My sister’s a tough cookie, she’ll be fine.” Nijika brushed it off.

PA-san shivered. Ignorance is a bliss, she guessed.

“Well, will she make it before customers start coming in?” PA-san asked. “I know today’s going to be a pretty busy day.”

“Yup!” Nijika said, showing her phone with her texts with Seika.

“Sis, will you umm be able to come back to Starry?”

“ye”

“Sure?”

“yes, niji. need to get your laughter out of my head first. was it really that funny?”

“No, not really now that I think about it.”

“ugh, gimme an hour”

“You got it, Sis!”

PA-san’s horrified expression only got worse as she saw the texts.

“We apologised, so we’re good.” Ryo added. “Mostly good.”

“Aaand we did get it out of our system, PA-san. So, don’t worry! We’re normal people today!” Nijika pumped her fist in the air. Ryo followed suit.

“U-uhh, yeah! Good job... you two.” PA-san shakily congratulated.

Thank goodness nobody else is here. We’d lose customers if they heard that.

“You guys can wait for Kita-chan and Bocchi-chan before you set up everything.” PA-san advised.

“Sure, sure!” / “Ok.” / “Meow!”

Hitori walked down the streets of Shimokitazawa, her body following the usual shifting from left to right from the weight of her guitar. She's done this so many times, and if she were to keep count, she'd probably be reaching four to five digit numbers. It was mundane, having to walk to work. She saw many familiar landmarks, even the ones that don't stand out. Walking through the same streets usually does that to a person.

Yet, she found herself enjoying the same old walk just a little bit more. Maybe it's from the weather, where despite the weather reports predicting rain later in the day, the skies were clear of any rain clouds. Or, it's from the temperature, being perfect for her in her usual tracksuit that tended to make her feel stuffy on hot days. Or, it could be because she knew that the band was going to practise once again, an activity that she does almost as often as she walks to Starry, yet evermore she gets excited for.

Or, maybe because for the first time in a while, she's walking alone. No need to worry about talking, or coming up with interesting topics. No need to worry about how she looked beside someone who definitely looked better than her. Just her, the street, and her thoughts.

She passed by a familiar pole. It was the one Kita pulled her aside from, saving Hitori from an embarrassing moment and a headache.

Kita-chan...

She accepted her rejection? Hitori wasn't really sure if that was the right way to put it, but that's essentially what the redhead did. She was happy for them to stay as friends, despite the impossible hill Hitori climbed - that is, having to say no to Kita's confession. Hitori was even more happy that she wasn't hated for it. She thought that if she declined Kita, it would scar the redhead. That they would slowly turn to hate each other, to the point of rifting apart the band. Sure,

most of that line of thinking was exacerbated by Hitori, but at the very least their friendship wouldn't be the same.

But, things are still good. In fact, they were better than good. They are guitar sisters now.

Part of Hitori still cannot believe that she gets to hang out and be with Kita. It was natural, with all of their differences. Though, another part of her can believe it. Becoming closer with Kita, she noticed that the two share insecurities. Hitori saw the passion that Kita has with music, wanting to become as good as Hitori. Just recently, Hitori also noticed that the two become cherry-faced so easily when it comes to love. Both of them care deeply for the other, which made the talk so much harder to actually do.

Hitori still agrees that both of them are opposites. Polar opposites.

But, like a magnet, opposites attract? I guess that means something.

Hitori was never good with analogies. She usually took them too seriously.

She still had to find a way to stop Kita and Futari from competing. There already is an ongoing power struggle within the Gotoh family, and adding their 'friendly competition' would be adding more flames to the fire. She could tell, even from a mile away, that their rivalry will spell disaster. For the both of them, and for Hitori herself.

All this thinking about Kita-chan, huh. Well, it would make sense why I'm thinking about her.

"... ri-chan!"

Huh? It's like... I can hear her.

"... tori-ch..."

Is this normal? Should I see a doctor for th-

“Hitori-chan!” Kita latched onto Hitori’s guitar case. “Hi!”

“Wauh!” Hitori almost lost her balance. “Kita-chan? Wh-what are you, why are you, h-h-how are you-”

“Hahaha, sorry for scaring you!” Kita apologised. “I came here as fast as I could. Didn’t think I’d actually catch up with you.”

“A-ah, I see.” Hitori responded.

I think Kita-chan takes the cake for most heart attacks nearly induced on me. Might need to talk with Ryo-chan about a potential hospital visit in the future.

They continued to walk, with Kita coming to Hitori’s side.

“Y-you didn’t have to hurry, Kita-chan.” Hitori said.

“Oh? Guess I’m too excited for today’s practice.” Kita pondered. “It’s been sooooo long!”

“Y-yeah.”

“And plus,” Kita smirked. “I can’t stay too long away from my guitar sister.”

“W-w-waa-h-huh?”

“Hehe, I’m just teasing. Hitori-chan?”

Kita waved her arm in front of the twitching pinkhead, finding no response.

Kita sighed. “Still the same Hitori-chan, hmm.”

The redhead giggled.

“I don’t mind. I don’t mind at all.”

“Alright Hitori-chan, like we practised. Okay?” Kita whispered just behind the entrance to Starry. “We’ll wow them for sure!”

“Eh? B-but we only practised I-like once!” Hitori stammered, pulling out her guitar.

“Oh, that’s fine! I know you’ll do great! Alright, follow my lead.” Kita pulled out her guitar. “Wait.”

Kita pulled out her phone.

“Is everything ready PA-san?”

“Yup! It’s just light switches, Kita-chan.”

“Just making sure. your cue is when we open the entrance.”

“Gotcha. Leave it to me!”

“Ryo, you could try paying more attention to class.” Nijika lightly scolded. “I can help you with your assignment... hmm, maybe tomorrow? But it’s going to eat into my-”

Nijika got cut off by the entrance opening. She turned to look at the newcomer when the lights suddenly turned off.

“WAH! P-power outage?” Nijika shouted.

“No, I think our guitarists have arrived.” Ryo pointed back to the door, where two silhouetted figures stood.

“Fufu~, don’t you know our names, Ryo-chan?” One figure scoffed.

“Y-yeah!” The other said, though not as confident as the first. “H-haven’t you heard of...”

The other figure stepped down, flipped her pink hair and started to shred.

“Gotoh Hitori?” Hitori said as she struck a pose. It was obvious she was slightly shivering, with her guitar looking like it was about to slip from her hands.

“Aaaaaaaand...” The first figure also stepped down, beside Hitori. She looked at her guitar for a moment, before deciding to play some chords that looked cool.

“Kita Ik-” Kita cleared her throat. “Kita Kita!”

“A-and t-t-together, we’re...”

“The Guitar Sisters!” / “The Guitar Sisters...”

Both guitarists announced as they both did a pose that mirrored each other. The lights went back on as PA-san applauded the two.

“You go, girls!” PA-san whistled.

“Ahaha, y-yeah...” Nijika awkwardly laughed. She didn’t want to spoil the moment, especially since the sick riffs the two played weren’t audible. In the slightest.

Do they know how far they are from us?

“Sick riffs, you two.” Ryo said. “If I could hear them.”

“Ryo!”

“Huh? You... didn’t hear them?” Kita gasped.

“I t-told you, Kita-chan! They w-w-wouldn’t be able to hear...” Hitori muttered, sagging as she went down the steps.

“Welllll, it was kinda cool, you two. Plus points on the lights!” Nijika gave them a thumbs up.

A faint “You’re welcome!” could be heard in the distance.

“Thanks, Nijika-chan.” Kita gave a defeated smile. At least their little skit paid off.

“Is this what coming out as a couple means nowadays?” Ryo asked.

Nevermind, it backfired. Hard.

“Ryo!” Nijika shouted, giving the bassist a slap on the back.

“Ow.”

“C-c-couple???” Hitori shrieked. She didn’t think they would be talking about this to the others so soon. She still needed a minimum of five days to prepare her script and mental strength. Mostly her script. She was always awful with remembering things to say.

“Hah-ahahahaha, oh you.” Kita forced out. “I c-can explain.”

“So, you two aren’t a couple?” Ryo asked.

“Ryo, show some more tact!” Nijika yelled.

“Sorry. I mean, are you two gay? Specifically, for each other?”

That got her another slap. From both Nijika and Kita.

“Oww...” Ryo winced, rubbing her back.

“You deserve that, Ryo-chan.” Kita said. “Hitori-chan, come back!”

“Y-y-yes, I’m here!” Hitori jolted, looking around to find herself sitting down with the others.

“I know it isn’t really...” Nijika glared at Ryo. “... our place to pry, but what happened with you two last night? Seems like you two got a glow up.”

“Well...”

Kita explained to the drummer and bassist about the past events: Kita’s plan (that kind of backfired), their sleepover and tidbits of their heartfelt talk.

“... so, yeah! We aren’t a couple, but guitar sisters!” Kita shone, making everyone in the room recoil. Even PA-san.

“Y-yup.” Hitori nodded. “I’m r-really happy that Kita-chan d-doesn’t mind me k-kind of, w-well, rejecting her...”

“That’s rock, Bocchi.” Ryo gave her signature thumbs up.

“Quiet you.” Nijika smacked the bassist. “Well, for starters, good job Bocchi-chan for being honest. I know it took you a lot to pour out your heart to Kita-chan.”

“Ehehehehehehe...” Hitori giggled.

“There she goes. And you Kita-chan. Didn’t my advice work like a charm?”

“It did!” Kita beamed. “Thank you again for that talk, Nijika-chan.”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure. Hehe.”

“A-ah!” Hitori prematurely left her laughing delusion. “Th-thanks, Ryo-chan f-for the, umm, advice. To be h-honest with Kita-chan, and s-stuff.”

Ryo, stunned by Hitori’s words, coughed in her fist.

“Uhh, yeah. You should thank yourself more though. Takes big heart to do something like that.” Ryo smiled.

“R-really? Heheheh, ehehehehe...”

“Oh, Manager. Welcome!” PA-san greeted Seika.

The band turned to see Seika stumble in, a shaky grip on the handrail as she descended further into Starry.

“H-hey guys. Sorry for being late.” Seika said. “I was... umm, doing something really important. Yeah.”

“Sis, you didn’t even comb your hair.” Nijika pointed out.

“Oh. Whoops.”

“Let me help!” Kita sprung from her seat, pulling out a hair brush from her bag. “Here! If you need to, feel free to lean on me a bit.”

“Th-thanks, Kita-chan. I think I’m good.” Seika took Kita’s brush, waddling over to the bathroom to brush her hair.

“Nijika-chan, an explanation?” Kita’s voice and herself did a 180.

“Ah, hehehehe, y-you wouldn’t believe it, hehe...” Nijika scratched her cheek.

She explained the whole scenario after Kita left to go to Hitori’s home.

“I’m not that thin!” Kita pouted. “I’m trying to get some muscle now!”

“Blame Nijika.” Ryo accused. “She’s the one who started it.”

“Really? The betrayal~”

“Hey, okay! I might’ve still been tired from our jog, and you know how I am if I’m like that.” Nijika protested.

“Alright, I’m back. More or less.” Seika emerged from the bathroom, now with two masks on her face. “Let’s get Starry ready for the people. And one of you, please keep Nijicat away from me. The last thing I need is to start sneezing.”

“You heard the lady, let’s get cracking!” Nijika shouted.

“Yeah!” / “Yeah.” / “Ah, yeah...”

“Let’s get cracking?” Kita muttered to herself.

Another expression to add to the list. Maybe I should use these expressions regularly?

“Hey, Kita-chan. You got a minute?” Seika asked.

“Ah, yes Manager!” Kita walked over to Seika. “What is it?”

“So, are you and Bocchi-chan-”

“Ughh.” Kita groaned.

She proceeded to explain about the past events: Kita’s plan, their sleepover and tidbits of their heartfelt talk. Again.

After everything Kita had said, Seika just hummed.

“At least Bocchi-chan isn’t a bassist.”

“You got that right, Manager.”

“Want to swap now? You’ve been handling things pretty well, kind of warrants a break, hm?”

“A-ah, I th-think I’m f-fine. Thanks though, Nijika-chan.”

“Alright then!”

The pink and yellow duo were tasked with reception, being a relatively new task to Hitori. Though she had her doubts, Nijika made sure that no global catastrophes happened within the entrance of the livehouse. Maybe Nijika was being a bit hyperbole.

The blonde gave a brief orientation on what to actually do, right after Ryo lazily ‘taught’ Hitori how to manage reception. Of course, that

earned Ryo a bonk on the head.

“Th-there really isn’t much t-to do at reception, h-huh.” Hitori mumbled.

“Yep. Ryo’s explanation was half-right.” Nijika admitted. “It’s not like Starry has a continuous flow of customers. There are some hours where it is like that though.”

“O-oh...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take over when that happens.”

“T-thanks, Nijika-chan.”

Hitori fumbled with a drink ticket. She found it pretty genius that they were guitar picks, though she wondered where they got this many guitar picks. It probably wasn’t that expensive to make and buy them, but being someone who only has a couple, she wondered if they bought them in bulk or had to raid multiple music stores. Hitori was leaning more into the former, seeing as how they were all black. Unless, Nijika and Seika went to music stores with only black picks. It sounded like a hassle.

“So, what do you think of reception?” Nijika asked, who stopped playing a beat on her chair. Hitori snapped out of her thoughts.

“W-well, if I’m honest, I f-feel like I’m not doing m-much...” Hitori sighed. “Compared t-to the bar, where I’m always m-m-making drinks and stuff...”

“Hah! I had the same thoughts the first time Sis got me to do this. Makes sense that this is Ryo’s favourite job to do here.”

“Hehe, y-yeah.”

More customers came in, Hitori gave them their tickets. She had to suppress a yawn.

“So, ‘guitar sisters’.”

Hitori was wide awake.

“W-w-w-what about that?” Hitori vibrated. Nijika placed a hand on Hitori’s head, stopping the pinkhead from shaking. Like an off switch.

“Nothing wrong about it, I’m happy you two are getting close! Just wanted to know where that came from, is all.”

“O-oh. Well, I think it was b-back when we came along to w-watch Ryo-chan’s, umm, driving lesson?”

“Ah. That time. Hmm.”

“Is there s-something wrong, Nijika-chan?”

“Bad memories.” Nijika shuddered.

“O-oh, right.” Hitori recalled bringing the shaken blonde back to her home. And the gut punch. “Th-there, there?”

Hitori stroked Nijika’s arm, somehow missing and ending up sometimes combing her hair. Nijika giggled, appreciating the gesture.

“I’m fine now. I think. Don’t worry about it.” Nijika smiled.

“O-ok. Ah! I meant it was after we b-brought you home. Y-yeah, my bad...” Hitori remembered.

“And, guessing it came from Kita-chan?”

“Mhmm. Y-you know her and h-how she is.”

“Yup. I talked with her yesterday.”

Nijika sighed.

“Heh, you two are adorable sometimes.”

Did I say that out loud?

“Whaughhuh??”

Oops. Yeah, I did.

“Ignore what I said. Thinking out loud. Bocchi-chan?”

Nijika gave a bonk on Hitori’s head, who started to phase in and out of reality. That, or she started shaking so hard, the chair began to shake too.

“Wh-what do you mean by that, Nijika-chan?” Hitori asked, finally stabilised.

“I guess just in the way you two act together.” Nijika shrugged. “Not like I’m watching you guys 24/7.”

Hitori was horrified.

“I meant that as a joke! Sorry, sorry.” Nijika apologised. “Bad taste.”

“... how about you and Ryo-chan?” Hitori asked. “Surely you t-two are much more ad-adorable than me. And Kita-chan! Y-yeah.”

“Ehh, we’re more like an old couple. I m-mean, just describing our relationship, y’know. We’re less adorable and more ‘bicker’-y.”

“Ahh, y-yes. I get that from you two.”

“Right?”

It took a while for Hitori to ask, “... you’re not jealous?”

“Hmm? Of who?” Nijika tilted her head.

“Of u... us? Me and Kita-chan?”

“Why... would I be?”

“I... umm... don’t k-know?”

Nijika snickered at the both of them responding to the other with another question.

“This is going nowhere, ehehe.”

“S-sorry...” Hitori lowered her head.

“Don’t apologise, Bocchi-chan.” Nijika lifted her head. “We can’t be guitar sisters. I don’t even play guitar.”

“I c-can teach you!”

“You don’t need to. I guess what I’m saying is that we don’t need something like that.”

“H-huh??”

Hitori’s eyes were bulging so wide, Nijika thought that if they widened any more, they’d pop out of her face. For a second, the blonde was tempted to poke Hitori’s eye to see if it went back to normal. She refrained herself, for obvious reasons.

Now she really looks like an owl. Cute.

“Sorry. Let me say it this way.” Nijika cleared her throat. “We don’t need a new title for our friendship. We already got one! Err, I have one anyways.”

“R-really?” Hitori asked.

If Nijika-chan has one, then I should know! But, I don’t. C’mon Hitori, use that brain of yours and remember. Hnnnnnnng...

Hitori pressed her fingers on her temples, focusing all of her being into remembering. She took inspiration from when Ryo did this,

searching the depths of soul. Nijika watched for a few seconds, before shaking the pinkhead out of her ritual thing. She'd have to ask Ryo about this later, knowing that Hitori took this from the bassist.

"... s-sorry, Nijika-chan. I d-don't remember." Hitori bowed.

"It's ok, Bocchi-chan. Don't be so hard on yourself. After all..." Nijika placed her hand on Hitori's shoulder. "... you're my hero, right?"

Hitori remembered. She is the only one who knew about her alter-ego. She never judged her for hiding that away from the band; Nijika was more ecstatic about the band, now that she knew 'guitarhero' was playing with them. In a way, Nijika looked up to her. Just like how Kita looks up to her.

"Hehehe, ehehehehehe, I'm a role model, hehehehehe, ehehehehehe..." Hitori lost herself to her giggling.

"Ahaha, I wouldn't go that far, Bocchi-chan. Bocchi-chan?" Nijika awkwardly laughed, finding the pinkhead lost in her fantasies.

She swapped places with Hitori, knowing that it would be a while before Hitori snapped back to reality. In the meantime, Nijika served the usual customer here and there.

"Welcome back!" Nijika greeted the pinkhead after noticing her blink in confusion. "Don't worry, I took over for you."

"Th-thanks." Hitori smiled. "I, uhh, umm, d-don't have a cool title f-for you..."

"Oh? That's fine. There's only one Nijika Ijichi for you, Bocchi-chan!"

"Hehe, r-right."

"But if you want, think about it. Not saying that you have to! But think about it. How has the lovely Nijika Ijichi been to you?"

"W-well, I wouldn't s-say lovely..."

“Hey! I am lovely!”

While the two squabbled and enjoyed each other’s company, Hitori thought on the side. What did Nijika mean to her?

She was the one who saved her, back in that lonely playground. Sure, she only did that out of desperation for a fill in, but without Nijika coming into her life so suddenly... Hitori wasn’t sure where she’d be. Or who she’d be, really.

Music was always a staple of Hitori’s livelihood, ever since she started to get good at guitar. It was her avenue of sharing who she was and her feelings with other people, as she grew fond of music. So, to be in a band where she can express herself is terrifying, yet is what she always wanted.

Nijika was her... saviour? That sounded a bit too formal, and Hitori didn’t feel right with that title.

Maybe...

“Angel?” Hitori blurted out.

“Hmm?” Nijika picked up on what Hitori said. “What did you say, Bocchi-chan?”

“Ah, wh-what do you think of a-angel?” Hitori suggested. “I know, it sounds p-pretty lame, and now th-that I said it, it sounds kinda h-horrible. I’ll think of something else, I’m s-sorry to-”

“I like it. Angel. Is it because I ‘saved’ you?”

“Ehehehehe, y-yeah...”

“Well, hope you don’t mind your angel being a bit smug! I did save a cute guitarist~”

“M-me?? Nooooo, sh-shucks... hehehehehehe...”

The pinkhead was once again lost in her own laughter, leaving the blonde to take care of reception. Not that she minded.

“Hey, Niji, Bocchi-chan. Just wanted to...” Seika walked up to the duo. “... did you set her off?”

“K-Kinda.” Nijika twiddled with her ponytail. “Nothing bad, mind you!”

“Need me to get... anything?”

“Two pineapple juices please. Extra cold.”

“I’m not a waiter.”

“Well, you are here, aren’t you Sis?”

“Fine. We still have gallons of that stuff, and nobody’s ordering any.” Seika muttered as she went back down the steps.

“I wonder who’s fault that is, huuuuuuuh?” Nijika hollered down the steps. She rolled her eyes when she heard Seika faintly reply.

“Two pineapple juices please.”

“Manager, I’m sorry but you’ll need a drink ticket to order any drinks here. Please pick one up at the reception.”

“Haha, very funny. How’s a deduct in your pay so-”

“Yes ma’am. I assure you, we serve only the highest quality pineapple juice. Kita.”

“Why me?”

“Why... not you?”

“Ugh.”

Kita walked to the fridge to prepare some pineapple juice. She came back with two, ice cold cups of pineapple juice.

“No, Ryo-chan. You cannot have one. These are for customers.” Kita said, handing the two cups to Seika. “Who are they for anyways?”

“Oh, Nijika and Bocchi-chan. Reception can be very boring.” Seika replied.

“It CAN be boring, but doesn’t mean it IS boring.” Ryo added. “An expert myself would know how to spice things-”

“Anyways!” Kita clamped down Ryo’s mouth before it could spout out more lies. “You should take these to them! They must be tired. We got everything under control here.”

Ryo gave an ok gesture to Seika.

“Thanks, Kita-chan. Make sure this one actually does work. And don’t bring up the ‘she’s new to it’ excuse.” Seika instructed.

“Gotcha! She actually has done some work! I’ll make sure she does more!” Kita saluted.

Ryo’s ok gesture turned to a thumbs down.

Seika thanked Kita again and left, drinks in hand. Kita released her hold on Ryo.

“I can speak!” Ryo rejoiced.

“Yeah, you can.” Kita said.

“I think I’m getting the hang of making drinks.” Ryo admitted. “It’s not too hard.”

“Oh? Overconfidence?” Kita smirked.

“Nah. Just the right amount.”

“You’re on your own with the next order. Let’s see the amazing Ryo-chan work her magic then.”

“Witness... perfection. Oh, right timing.”

A customer went up to the bar counter.

“Hi. What would you like?” Ryo said flatly.

“You guys serve milk tea, right?” The customer asked.

“We serve milk tea?” Ryo turned to Kita, aghast. When the redhead glared at her, Ryo turned back to the customer. “I mean, yes we do.”

“Cool. I’ll have a large one, 50% sugar. Oh, and lessen the pearls. Those usually give me stomach aches.”

“O-ok. Give me a minute.”

Ryo turned to the numerous shelves, drawers and other appliances. She didn’t even know they served milk tea.

“What’s the matter?” Kita whispered. “Can’t find the milk tea?”

“Kita, this is the first time I’ve heard of milk tea being served here. Please, help me.” Ryo begged, in a somewhat hushed tone.

“Hmmmmmmmm, nah~”

“Please?”

“Nope. Sorry Ryo-chan, but I still have yet to see the ‘perfection’ you were talking about~” Kita stuck her tongue out.

“Ughhh...”

With dread creeping up her, Ryo proceeded to scour the whole bar, checking for the milk tea. Kita watched as Ryo opened each drawer and shelf, apologising from time to time to the customer for the wait.

“It’s cool. I can tell it’s her first time working here.” The customer said, upon Kita apologising for the second time.

“Oh, actually! She’s a long time worker here. It’s her third time being behind the bar, she’s not used to it yet!” Kita explained.

Eventually, Ryo found the stuff, hastily preparing the customer’s drink.

“H-here’s your drink.” Ryo shakily gave the milk tea to the customer.

“Hmm. Either there’s too much milk or there’s too much tea in here, but I don’t mind.” The customer took a sip. “Bit sweet too. Maybe stick to other jobs instead of bartending?”

Ryo gasped, while Kita covered her mouth with her hand.

“N-noted. Enjoy.” Ryo bowed.

After the customer left, Ryo slumped down onto the floor. Kita knelt down to the curled up bassist, who was hugging Nijicat. Though the cat was somewhat startled, it nestled into Ryo’s arms.

“Don’t worry, she’s a regular here. Good friends with Manager too, I see them talking often.” Kita soothed. “But you did well! Honest!”

“Leave me alone.” Ryo grunted.

“Aw, c’mon Ryo-chan! I thought you liked my company!”

“Mmmm...”

Kita sighed, giving a small headpat to Ryo before standing back up. She would have to take over for now.

Not so different from what usually happens.

Serving a few more customers later, Ryo stood back up, with Nijicat in her hands.

“Hi Ryo-chan!” Kita greeted Ryo.

“You’re fortunate that Nijicat gives me healing.” Ryo mumbled. “And that my ankle’s getting a lot better.”

“I know! Who’s a good kitty?” Kita played with the cat in Ryo’s arms, who mewed in glee.

While Kita continued to give pets and rubs to Nijicat, Ryo eyed Kita. She was deep in thought.

“Ryo-chan?” Kita took notice. “Something wrong?”

“Just thinking. You recovered surprisingly well from Bocchi’s rejection.” Ryo noted.

Kita took a minute to set her mind straight after that whiplash. Leave it to Ryo to come out with random, yet impactful topics to talk about.

“Y-yeah. That came out of nowhere, Ryo-chan.” Kita commented.

“Oh. Sorry.” Ryo replied.

“But back to what you said, yeah. I talked with Nijika-chan about it, said that I should just ask her and not worry about it, since in the end, we’re still going to be friends!”

“Mhmm.” Ryo nodded. “And, you’re happy with how things turned out.”

“Yup! Guitar sisters for the win!” Kita struck a pose. Ryo shut her eyes from the exuding aura. She wondered if Kita can control her aura or not - most likely not, considering the amount of times she’s been flashbanged on accident.

*Needs more research. I’ll ask Kita about potential experiments.
Mental note.*

“But, since you asked her out, there is part of you that wishes that she’d be your girlfriend.” Ryo denoted.

“A-well, when you put it like that, yes.” Kita admitted. “It’d be weird if I didn’t want that.”

“Has you, well, moved on?”

Kita sighed as she turned to look at the empty stage.

“No, Ryo-chan. Not at all.”

Kita leaned onto the bar counter, glancing at where Nijika and Hitori were. The guitarist was still laughing at herself while the blonde held down the fort.

“That part of me is still here. I’m willing to wait for Hitori-chan, as long as it takes. I want her to decide, on her own terms. But... if she falls in love w-with someone else...”

Kita turned back to Ryo, a little teary.

“... then, as her guitar sister, I should support her with everything I’ve got!”

Besides, I've got the coolest band of friends ever to back me up!

Ryo shot her a grin.

“Bocchi’s lucky to have you.” Ryo gave a reassuring pat on Kita’s shoulder, her free hand stroking her cat.

“Hmm, I’d say she’s luckier with you.” Kita quipped.

“Amen to that.”

“You’re not supposed to agree to that, Ryo-chan...”

“What? You said a fact. I agreed. You know what ‘amen’ means, right Kita?”

“Don’t make me slap you.”

“Meow!”

...

“I’m guessing you two didn’t make out. Shame.”

“That’s it, you’re getting slapped.”

“W-wait Kita. I was joking. Couldn’t you tell by my tone? Please, I have an ankle injury and a cat. You wouldn’t hurt someone with a-”

Ryo bit her tongue as she suppressed a scream.

I’m a strong girl, I’m a strong girl, I’m a strong girl...

That ends the, uhh, Chapter 9 saga? Thingy. Yeah. Hope you all enjoyed.

I’ve been writing less and less, the well’s dry again. Hopefully I can pick up the pace soon. I’m considering writing mini-stories so that my ideas aren’t wasted, but I don’t know if I wanna post them here or on a new separate fic.

Patience is a virtue, Kita Ikuyo from the hit anime and manga 'Bocchi the Rock!'.

Crazy that I thought that this was all going to be part of the finale of Ch. 9.

Next chapter whenever!

Interlude I

Chapter 19: Interlude I

The sisters have a chat with their mother.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

In the night of Shimokitazawa, a girl stood by the balcony of her apartment. She nibbled on some choco sticks, just as she had done before. Thankfully, she wasn't tired or sleep-deprived this time. She figured she should have something to snack on in the meantime. Her usual ponytail was instead let down, similar to the hairstyle of her pinkheaded guitarist.

Nijika looked up to the night sky. She could almost make out the hanging stars.

"Hi Mom! Made sure I wasn't sick, or tired, or sleep deprived. Really puts into perspective how I should keep myself healthy, huh? Hehe."

The blonde stretched as she lazily hung her arms over the railing.

"I've been good. The band's been good too. Kita-chan and Bocchi-chan are guitar sisters now, which I think is adorable. You would love to meet them, they are so sweet!"

Nijika nibbled on a choco stick.

"Ryo's been smiling more often now. It's... a bit weird, not gonna lie. I'm so used to her poker face, I forget she can show other emotions sometimes. Hehe, sorry, that's a bit mean. But she's a happier person now with Nijicat. I'm starting to like the little furball too. It's just so darn cute! Really wishing we really pushed through with that

immunotherapy you always wanted us to take. Nijicat is basically a staple at Starry now.”

“Niji, who are you talking to?” A faint voice rang behind Nijika.

“Oh, it’s Mom. You better get your butt here after you’re done! Mom wants to see you!” Nijika replied back.

“Ok!”

Nijika laughed to herself.

“I somehow got Sis to clean the dishes for once. Crazy, right Mom? She’s been doing well, and so has Starry. I can’t imagine anyone else taking care of the livehouse than her.”

Nijika put away the choco sticks.

“Yes Mom, sorry. I shouldn’t be eating too many of these. Gotta watch my weight! And, umm, as for me. I’m great! It is quite tiring taking care of all my bandmates, especially with Ryo’s and Nijicat’s antics, but I love what I do.”

Nijika saw a cloud shaped like a drumset.

“Hehe, that cloud looks like the drums I play, Mom! You always loved watching the clouds back at home, huh? I’m starting to see why. Ahahaha, that one looks like Sis!”

“What looks like me?” Seika emerged from the house, hands on her hips.

“Nothing! N-nothing at all!” Nijika suppressed her snickering.

“Right. By the way, I heard your phone go off.”

“Oh, shoot! I have to help Ryo with her assignment!”

Nijika turned to the skies once again.

“Sorry Mom, I’d love to talk. But a bassist we all know needs to pass high school, and I’m somehow responsible for that.”

“You could just suggest that she get a tutor.” Seika commented.

“Bye Mom! Have fun talking with Sis!” Nijika ignored her sister as she dashed back into the house.

“Tck. I swear, she’s been ignoring me more often. She’s forgetting who’s older here.” Seika shook her head.

She took the leftover choco sticks and placed one on her mouth. They weren’t cigarettes, but they sure felt like them. With a sigh, Seika looked to the night sky.

“Hi... Mom. Been too long since we’ve talked. Niji’s the one who suggested I actually, umm, talk with you. Says it really helps. So, I’m here.”

Seika instinctively went for her lighter, realising that she didn’t have one nor was the thing in her mouth a cigarette.

“Sorry for the smoking. I know that this stuff can get me killed, but it helps keep me relaxed. And somewhat stress free. Work does that to a person. You always warned me of that, huh Mom? Well, it’s biting me in the butt now.”

Seika bit into her choco stick.

“Things have been good. Starry’s been good too. The girls are all so sweet. You would really like them. They’re nice.”

Seika sighed.

“I’m... sorry. Don’t have much to share. Niji was always the one between us who shared more. She still has that child-like energy when she was young. Amazing.”

Seika twiddled with her thumbs. It took her a while before speaking again.

“Thank you. Mom. You were always a good mother to me and Niji. Even with Dad being absent as usual, even more so when you passed. Niji has no idea where he is, and I intend to keep it that way. No hard feelings?”

Seika paused.

“Sorry. Back to what I was saying. Thank you. I... never got to say that to you. I regret never even showing you my appreciation f-for you.”

Seika wiped a tear.

“I hate myself for that. That we had to meet for the last time like that.”

Seika sobbed softly.

“I miss you Mom...”

“Hey Sis?” Nijika’s voice rang. “What’s the capital of Indonesia? Ryo’s asking, and I’m also curious.”

Seika turned to the house and chuckled, wiping away her tears.

“Why are you asking me? I failed college.” Seika sniffed.

“I dunno. Thought you might know. Alright, you can go back to talking with Mom.”

“Ok.”

Seika looked to the skies.

“But I still have Niji. And Niji still has me. We’re still the closest sisters on planet Earth. You always wanted that for us.”

Seika took a deep breath. In and out.

“I know that you’re out there, still watching us from afar. Maybe Niji’s child-like wonder is getting to me. But I don’t know, maybe I could use a little of that.”

Seika finished her choco stick.

“Alright, I have to go to bed. Work. I’m also getting old too. Don’t tell Niji that. She’ll tease me for a lifetime.”

Seika laughed.

“Bye Mom. I love you.”

Before heading back into the house, Seika saw something. It might be wishful thinking, but she thought she saw the stars twinkle.

She would have to thank Nijika later. Talking with her mother was nice.

It has been decided. I’m gonna write these short things from time to time. Gonna add them here too so that it makes my monkey brain happy seeing big word count.

Also wow didn’t I just write a whole chapter before? Brain decided to be committed, or something.

Writing this was fun. I don’t know what else to say, the bond these two have is so sweet to see.

I have another short story in the works, but idk when I’ll be finished with that. College about to start, so definitely things will slow down.

Look forward to whatever I post next? Yeah, that!

Chapter 10

Chapter 20: Chapter 10

Ryo brings Nijicat to a shoe store. The horror.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Alright, I'm approaching the perimeter.

Ryo inched closer towards the shoe store she was planning to visit, with Nijicat in tow. Her brilliant idea/joke was now coming into fruition; she recalled even getting approval (somewhat) from Nijika! Though she actually wanted to window shop for some new shoes that she can definitely, totally afford, she might as well teach her cat to refrain from scratching shoes. And what better place than the utopia of shoes?

She was grateful for two things. One, the mall she frequented allowed pets inside. Most stores within the mall also followed this rule, so she was in the clear for bringing the stray in. Two, Nijika and her sister were out. She was worried that Nijika would have her head when she saw that she was potentially risking damaging products in a store for Nijicat's training. So, knowing that they were out brought relief to the bassist. But, in case they did run into each other...

"Strawberry Burst, I have entered the building. Payload is secured. Eyes confirmation, over." Ryo spoke into her phone.

"Ryo-chan, I'm literally across from you. You can see me waving at you." Kita's voice came from her phone.

The bluehead turned to see Kita sitting on a bench. She was surprised to see Hitori next to her, who also waved at Ryo.

“Bocchi? Thought you weren’t a mall person.” Ryo jogged over to the two. “How long have you two been here?”

“We just got here about 10 minutes ago.” The redhead explained. “We’re just deciding what to do while you do your... thing.”

“Kita-chan d-dragged me here...” Hitori croaked, already crumpling from all of the exposure to strangers. She was fine observing people from afar, but with so many people kind of close to her, she couldn’t handle it.

“Remind me why I agreed to this, Blueberry Pie?” Kita asked.

“Firstly, it’s Blue Blur. Secondly, so that Nijicat stops scratching Bocchi’s shoes.” Ryo reasoned.

“A-actually, now that you mention th-that... pl-please, Kita-chan.” Hitori pleaded with Kita, ignoring the fact that she was agreeing with one of Ryo’s ideas. She should probably see a doctor for that. “These are m-my third pair I had t-to buy. My parents are st-starting to get worried...”

Kita sighed. “Alright, fine. I get to hang out with my guitar sister anyways!”

“Ehehehe, y-yeah...” Hitori awkwardly laughed. Her day of reckoning, that is having to go shopping with the extrovert, has finally come. Sure, they never agreed to go shopping, but she knew Kita. Shopping was a guarantee with the extrovert.

“Though, isn’t it a bit much to have me look out for Nijika-chan? We don’t even know where she is.”

“No, it isn’t Strawberry Burst. Did you not listen to my briefing?” Ryo said. “It is imperative that she does not know about any of what I’m going to be doing. Not a whisper.”

“Ok, ok, Ryo-chan. We’ll try-”

“It’s Blue Blur. Stick to the codenames please.” Ryo looked around.
“In case Nijika catches one of us.”

“Umm, I d-don’t have a codename…” Hitori raised her hand.

“Oh. You can be, uhh, Pink Bubblegum. Yeah.”

“O-ok.”

“Isn’t that a bit on the-”

“Alright.” Ryo cut Kita off. “You two, stay on comms. I’ll try to be quick.”

“Y-you mean on our phones, r-right?” Hitori squawked.

“Yes, Hitori-chan.” Kita said. “It’s better to deal with the spy lingo than not. Ryo-chan wouldn’t budge about that.”

“What, it’s cooler.” Ryo insisted. “And the codenames are useful.”

“Whatever you say, Blue Blur.”

“I’ll head over to the target site now. Remember, if you see her within the vicinity, call it out to me. If things get ugly, try getting her away from the target site. I trust that you two can handle this.”

Kita snickered. Although she thought that this whole thing was a little stupid, she went along with it. It was charming, and she got to hang out with Hitori too.

“Roger that, Blue Blur!”

Hitori looked at Kita in confusion.

“She means to keep Nijika-chan away from the shoe store.”

“A-ah, y-yes ma’am!” Hitori saluted, hitting her forehead a bit too hard. “Ow…”

“C’mon Hitori-chan! There’s a nice cafe we can relax in before we go shopping! Good thing the store I wanna go to is just across the shoe store!”

Kita hopped off the bench and dashed further into the mall.

“Hey.” Ryo stopped Hitori from running after Kita. “Try to have fun today. I know I gave you two a job, but don’t stress too much about it. Sorry that I didn’t plan for you to be here.”

“Oh, it’s o-ok. I wanted to c-come here with Kita-chan to find so-some clothes for when I v-visit her home. Going to c-convince them about Kessoku Band.” Hitori explained.

“Oh. You sure you don’t want Nijika to go instead? She’ll probably do a better job. N-no offence.”

“N-no. As her guitar teacher, it has t-to be me. More convincing that way. M-m-maybe. Hopefully...”

Ryo patted Hitori on the shoulder.

“Then, go have fun with Kita. Keep an eye out for Nijika when you can.” Ryo gave Hitori a grin.

“Th-thanks, Ryo-chan.” Hitori smiled as she waddled off into where Kita ran.

Ryo watched as Hitori scrambled around, trying to look for where the redhead went. Said redhead appeared shortly, yoining a trembling Hitori further into the mall. Ryo sighed. Her cheeks started to ache a bit.

“Meow!” Nijicat meowed.

“You’re right. I think I’m smiling too much. My face hurts.”

After a little stroll around the mall and a little snack break that totally did not leave her broke, Ryo approached the shoe store once again.

“Alright, I’m here. Eyes confirmation, over.” Ryo spoke into her phone.

It took a minute before she got a reply.

“Yep, Blue Blur! We can see you!” Kita’s voice rang out.

Ryo turned to the clothes store, just across the shoe store, on the second floor. She squinted her eyes, making out Kita’s and Hitori’s bodies by the window. She could almost see the poor introvert’s shaking as Kita held up multiple articles of clothing. Ryo couldn’t tell if the pile of clothes besides them was for Hitori or not. Hopefully it wasn’t.

“... h-help me...” Hitori’s pleading was audible.

It probably was. Poor Hitori.

“Have more confidence in yourself, Hitori-chan! Trust me, you’ll look absolutely stunning in this!” Kita shouted. Ryo could feel her aura through her phone.

“Ughh...”

“I’m going in now.” Ryo announced.

Nijicat yawned.

“The payload’s getting sleepy. And it takes long naps. Wish me luck.” Ryo added.

“Good luck out there! We’ll keep you... safe?” / “G-good luck...”

Two voices cheered on as Ryo slotted her phone into her breast pocket. She silently thanked the inventor of such a pocket. Maybe

one day she could reach such recognition. Perhaps she could invent a bass with a pocket?

Ryo pushed open the doors, immediately hit with cool air. Aircons within stores in malls always seemed to be stronger than the ones for the malls. She sighed in relief. Nothing beats somewhat fresh, chilling air.

She took a look around. She was familiar with the store's layout, already mentally mapping out the different sections of the store. Shoes lined up on shelves, varying in many different types and brands; groups of people and families flocked the numerous shelves; store assistants strolled about, helping the occasional customer. She's been here before, now with a mission in mind.

Ryo decided to pass by the-dubbed-by-Ryo 'schoolgirl' section, keeping a secure hold on Nijicat. Since Hitori didn't wear anything else besides her pseudo-uniform and pink tracksuit, she usually wore her school shoes. Ryo thought this would be a good place to start, considering how much the feline loved making scratch marks on Hitori's shoes.

The cat marvelled at the many pairs of shoes on each shelf, extending its paw at some.

"Nijicat, no. Bad." Ryo scolded. "Shoes are nice."

Since she was there, Ryo tried on some school shoes that she thought would fit her uniform.

Too heavy.

She tried on another pair, pushing aside Nijicat.

Ehh, makes my feet look bigger than they are.

Another pair. Another push.

Now these just look awful.

Making sure that she didn't have to pay for any damaged products, she moved onto the sneakers collection, which made up most of the shoes in the store. She kept a close eye on her cat, who seemed to no longer held an interest in shoes.

"You don't like sneakers?" Ryo asked the feline.

"Meow."

"Interesting. Noted."

She spent most of her time here, trying on different sneakers in numerous colours, shapes and sometimes sizes. With some pairs, she felt that they fit her like a glove, keeping mental notes of which pairs to consider buying in the future. Other pairs, she thought of certain outfits back at home that would fit nicely. Some pairs were outright horrendous, with Ryo nearly throwing them away before realising that she would be causing a scene. And she would have to pay.

Did she forget to mention that she didn't bring enough money today? Although considering this was Ryo, it's already a default to find the bassist without any money.

All the while, Nijicat somewhat enjoyed Ryo trying on shoes. Sometimes, Ryo would observe Nijicat's reaction on a certain pair, taking into consideration the pitch of the meow she would receive and deciding if the pair of shoes was worth it. Who knew her cat was such a great advisor on shoes?

She was glad to be window shopping on her own. With Kita, she would be overwhelmed by her fashionable ideas as Ryo would struggle to stay afloat in the tsunami of shoes Kita would get her. Granted, the redhead had a great sense of fashion, so most of those shoes would look great on Ryo. Maybe a shopping trip with her is in order. She'd have to mentally prepare herself for the trials that come with hanging out with Kita. And also bring money.

With Hitori, she would be similar to Nijicat, gawking at the many shoes. Except she would only try on a pair or two before turning into ashes. She figured that bringing along the introvert to places that are quiet and secluded work much better, places where Hitori can relax. The record shop trip was a success, so maybe a trip to Ryo's favourite ice cream place wouldn't be so bad. She'd have to bring money there too.

Why does everywhere I go need money? What happened to free stuff?

With Nijika... well, it'd be an ordinary day. The bassist drops by her place so many times, it might as well be Ryo's second home. The two have hung out so often as well that they could do anything and it would be somehow enjoyable. Birdwatching, paint watching, even watching themselves.

She would be alright. Except I'd have my head split in half if she knew about Operation: Feline Rehab.

"Strawberry Burst, Pink Bubblegum, status?" Ryo said into her pocket. She sat on a free seat, petting Nijicat.

A little while later, the phone responded.

"No sign of her, Blue Blur." Kita's voice said. "St-stay still, Hitori-chan! You look adorable in this hoodie!"

"R-really? Hehehe, ehehehehehehe..." Hitori's giggling made it through.

"Seems like you two are having fun." Ryo said.

"Yeah we are!" / "Y-yeah, haha..."

"I found out something. Nijicat only goes for school shoes, nothing else. Will try to develop this theory further."

“Huh? But, wouldn’t my shoes get scratched too?” Kita asked. “I sometimes wear my school uniform at Starry. And hey, don’t you wear school shoes too, Ryo-chan?”

“So, it h-has to do something with m-m-me?” Hitori concluded.

“Seems that way. Like I said, will develop this. I was thinking a scratching post would help.” Ryo suggested.

“Oh, that could work! I know cats love those!” Kita agreed.

“I’m going to need money to buy that, so if you two-”

“No.”

“I-ah, w-wouldn’t mind...” Hitori’s voice trailed off, before speaking again with a newfound shakiness in her voice. “... n-nevermind, no. Sorry Ryo-chan.”

“Bummer. Guess my cat will never recover.” Ryo fake sniffed.

“Oh my gosh, Ryo-chan! Just ask your parents. I’m sure they’ll agree to pay for it!” Kita groaned.

“I... you know, now that you said it, that doesn’t sound like a bad idea. Thanks Kita.”

“Maybe you should’ve asked them first instead of us...” Kita mumbled.

“A-ah, is th-that all, Kita-chan?” Hitori asked. “I th-think I’m reaching my limit...”

“Oh, yeah sure! I’m getting a little tired too. I can carry these, you can carry those Hitori-chan.”

“O-ok...”

Soft rustling can be heard.

“We’re wrapping up now, Ryo-chan. You done there?” Kita asked.

“Eh, I could use another lap or two here, but yeah. I’m good.” Ryo said.

“Great! I guess we can meetup-”

Kita suddenly stopped talking. Ryo had to check her phone to see if it ran out of battery.

“Strawberry Burst?” Ryo asked. “Kita?”

No response.

That is, until Hitori spoke up, though in a hushed tone.

“Isn’t th-that Nijika-chan? W-with Manager?”

“You’re right!” Kita replied.

Ryo felt a chill down her spine. She whipped her head around, sighing upon not finding either Nijika or her sister nearby.

They must be inside the clothes store, thank goodness.

“Can you guys stall?” Ryo requested. “In case they come here. If Nijika will have my head, Manager will absolutely obliterate me.”

“Umm, sure!” Kita warily agreed.

“Thank you, Strawberry Burst.”

“Meow!”

“Payload also says thanks.”

Kita giggled. “Though... it’s going to be hard stalling them, unleeeeeess...”

Hitori yelped. “Wh-what? M-m-m-me??”

“Sorry, Hitori-chan, but it’s the only way. Nijika-chan and Manager will definitely want to see you in these outfits.”

Hitori whimpered.

“Please, Bocchi. This is for your shoes.” Ryo affirmed.

“... f-fine.”

“Yay! Thank you, guitar sis!” Kita blared. Ryo thought she heard her eardrums pop.

“Urk! N-not so tight Kita-chan!”

“I’ll treat you later after this!”

“I’d rather g-go home...”

“Do keep the phone call on. Need to know where they go next if ever.” Ryo said.

“Roger that, Blue Blur. C’mon Hitori-chan, let’s go meet them!” Kita beckoned.

“A-ah, yes...” Hitori reluctantly agreed.

“Mrrreow!”

“Payload wishes you two luck.” Ryo cheered. “I’ll probably still be around the mall. Keep note of that.”

“Wha-Kita-chan?” Ryo heard Nijika’s voice through her phone. She lowered her phone’s volume and muted herself in the call as she left the shoe store.

“Oh, hi Nijika-chan! Hi Manager!” Kita greeted the two. “Funny seeing you guys here. We just finished shopping!”

“Shopping? You and Bocchi-chan?” Seika asked. “Didn’t think you’d agree to that, Bocchi-chan. Nice.”

“Auwhaugh, th-thanks?” Hitori responded.

“Me and Sis were gonna buy some sports clothes for me. She convinced me to take this jogging thing more seriously, ehehe.” Nijika said.

Ryo passed by the main atrium. She thought that the fountain looked nice. Nijicat got to paw at the running water, getting a few giggles from Ryo.

“Yeah, you can’t use my old clothes. You look awful in them.” Seika commented.

“Oh, shut it Sis! I look good in anything!”

“Well, while you’re both here, want to see some of the outfits I got Hitori-chan?” Kita asked.

“Y-yeah?” Hitori added. Even though Ryo wasn’t there, she could tell that everything in the pinkhead screamed to not agree.

“Sure! Sorry Bocchi-chan, but your fault for always being in that tracksuit of yours~” The younger sister agreed.

“Eh, we got time. Show us what you got.” The older sister also agreed.

Ryo waddled around the mall, mostly ogling at all of the things she couldn’t buy. Meanwhile, she eavesdropped on the others, who were getting a mini fashion show from Kita and Hitori. Ryo would occasionally hear a “Woah.” or a “Wow.” from either sister as she guessed that Kita cycled through the different outfits she got for Hitori. Said pinkhead barely made a sound, probably too clammed up to speak. At least she was going through them relatively well.

“Wow, Bocchi-chan! You look cool! Like, really cool!” Nijika exclaimed.

“Yeah, Bocchi-chan. Really fits the rocker lifestyle.” Seika added.

“Actually, Hitori-chan herself picked this outfit herself. With a little bit of my help.” Kita explained.

“Ehehehehehe, thanks guys, hehehehe...” Hitori giggled.

Ryo sighed, still playing with the water from the fountain. Nijicat was now taking a bath, having Ryo to pull it away from the fountain.

Wonder what she looks like right now. Maybe Bocchi could show me one day. Can't risk heading over there. I'd also look like a creep.

“Geez, Nijicat. You're soaked. Let's get you dried up.” Ryo said, ignoring her side getting progressively more damp as she carried the cat to the nearest bathroom. The cat's protests soaked even more of her outfit. Ryo tried her best to ignore it.

“You, uhh, bought a lot of these, Kita-chan.” Nijika pointed out. “Sure Bocchi-chan's ok with it?”

“W-w-well, I do n-need new clothes...” Hitori mumbled. “A-and, it's... kinda hard t-to say no to Kita-chan.”

“Ignore her, she agreed to it wholeheartedly!” Kita beamed.

“Y-yeah, whatever you say.” Seika grunted.

Why do they place the bathrooms so far away, at such inconvenient places? Like, seriously? The second floor? And the whole ground floor has none?

Ryo held her cat underneath the blowdryer, occasionally swapping places with the feline to dry off her clothes. Out came a literal furball, having Ryo to comb Nijicat's fur back to normal. She always brought one in case Nijicat's pristine fur got messy.

“There, all good.” Ryo combed the final touches. “Looking classy, Nijicat.”

“Meow!”

“Hehe, yeah.”

Ryo listened back into the call.

“Sis, you could try and h-help with the, hnnng! With the bags.” Nijika heaved.

“Nah.” Seika hummed. “I’m paying all this. Helps build muscle anyway.”

“Your face builds muscle.”

“That’s mean, Niji.”

“You’re mean.”

“Sometimes, yeah.”

“Guys? Help with Hitori-chan’s restoration would be nice~” Kita sang, with slight slapping noises heard.

Ryo decided to spend more time under the blowdryer. She wanted her clothes to be desert dry. She did get a weird look at a woman who walked in, but she paid no mind.

It’s free. What’s so weird about it?

“Kita-chan? Where’s the bathroom? I drank a bit too much lemonade before I got here.” Nijika asked.

“Oh, it should be somewhere on this floor. Hmm...” Kita trailed off.

Ryo left the bathroom, cat in hand.

“... n-next to... this st-store...” Hitori wearily said.

“Oh, Hitori-chan! Welcome back!” Kita exclaimed.

“Thanks Bocchi-chan. I’ll be quick!” Nijika thanked the pinkhead.

Ryo stopped.

Wait.

She craned her head to the right, finding the same clothes store that was across the shoe store. And, she spotted a little blonde ponytail about to-

Ryo zipped back into the bathroom, locking herself in one of the stalls. She loosened her grip on Nijicat after realising she was holding onto the cat a bit too hard.

“Sorry, Nijicat.” Ryo whispered. “But we’re going to have to be real quiet.”

Ryo pulled out her phone so that her voice could be heard better.

“Strawberry Burst, Pink Bubblegum. If you can hear me, this is a code red. I repeat, a code red. Nijika’s entering to my proximate location, putting Blue Blur and the payload at risk. Improvise. Blue Blur out.” Ryo breathed.

“What? Oh no-”

Kita’s voice got cut off as Ryo ended the call. She hoped that the two guitarists would come up with something.

I just have to stay here until she leaves.

She heard Nijika walk into the bathroom, the blonde humming one of the band’s songs. She jiggled the knob on Ryo’s stall.

“Whoops! My bad! Sorry.” Nijika apologised, taking the one on Ryo’s left. Ryo silently fistpumped.

That rose my chances of escape. I’m closer to the exit than her. Stay silent and we can-

“Mew.”

Ryo’s eyes widened as Nijicat softly meowed, getting tired of being held at such an awkward angle. Slowly, Ryo held Nijicat closer to herself as the cat snuggled further into Ryo’s body. Ryo silently sighed.

Phew, close one. Would’ve been really bad if Nijicat was-

“Mrreow!”

Ryo’s eyes were about to pop out of her face as Nijicat yawned, closing its eyes to sleep. Ryo darted her pupils to each side of the bathroom stall, hoping that somehow, Nijika was deaf. Or was listening to music.

“Wha?”

She really wished Nijika was deaf right now.

“Niji... cat?” Nijika said, a flush heard and her stall door opened. Ryo heard footsteps inching closer to her own stall, before they faded. She heard the sink tap turn on.

Nijika’s washing her hands! This is my chance. Maybe I could slip-

Ryo’s heart rate skyrocketed when Nijika knocked on the stall door.

“Hello? Nijicat?” Nijika asked. “Are you in there?”

Ryo started to shiver. Her inevitable doom was approaching. Nowhere to run, no one to call for help. This was the end of the line.

Until, Nijicat, now fully awake from the knocking of Nijika, hopped off Ryo and scurried under the stall door.

Thank you, Nijicat. My saviour.

“Ahh! Nijicat! It really is you!” Nijika said, petting the newcomer.

“Thank goodness I bring masks all the time now. Why are you here?”

“Meow!”

“Heh, right. Cat.”

Ryo hushed her breathing, hoping that Nijika would think that Nijicat was just here... for some reason. Yeah, that sounded believable.

“Hi, excuse me?” Nijika knocked on the stall door once again, making Ryo’s body tense up. “Sorry for the disturbance, but this is my friend’s cat. Err, stray cat. Where did you find Nijicat?”

Ryo began to make many hand gestures, in an attempt to somehow teleport out of her current predicament.

C’mon, c’mon, c’mon! This works in anime, so why not now?

“... right. Sorry for my manners.” Nijika apologised, presumably realising how rude it might’ve been to disturb someone in the bathroom. “I’ll just, umm, wait outside to ask you. S-sir, ma’am. Ma’am sir?”

After an awkward pause, Ryo heard Nijika step away from the stall. Ryo would sigh in relief, but she kept silent. Nijika always had sharp ears.

“Oh, h-hi Nijika-chan!” Kita’s voice rang into the bathroom. “How much lemonade did you drink?”

Thank goodness. Backup has arrived.

“Kita-chan? Do you know why Nijicat’s here? Without its owner?”
Nijika ignored Kita’s comment.

“Ah, w-well. Haha, that’s soooooo strange.”

C’mon, do better than that Kita. My life’s on the line.

“A-ah, umm, c-can I use the ba-bathroom now?” Hitori’s voice chimed in.

“Oh, sorry! Sure!” Kita said.

Ryo heard the pinkhead rush into the stall to her right.

“You two just left my sister there?” Nijika asked. “N-not that she can’t handle herself, haha. Probably should’ve phrased that better.”

“Manager said she’ll be waiting by the mall entrance. Me and Hitori-chan were thinking of joining her going back home. It’s been a long day after all.” Kita explained.

“Huh, yeah it is. Time flies.” Nijika whistled. “Ok, sure. We’ll meet you back at the entrance, Bocchi-chan?”

“Y-yes!” Hitori shouted in her stall.

Ryo exhaled in relief, letting go of a breath she didn’t know she was holding. They were leaving. Pretty smart of Kita to suggest that. Or they were actually going to leave. Hitori did go through a lot. She’d treat them both another time as thanks.

Though, now that the bluehead thought about it, Nijika kind of sidelined her supposed presence. A bit too fast. One second she was being all polite and now it’s like she almost forgot that this mystery stranger had Nijicat, the cat of her coolest (objectively, of course), bestest friend in the whole galaxy.

“See you at the entrance, Ryo~ ”

Ryo choked on air as she somehow stumbled over in her stall.

“What? Sh-she was here the whole time? I didn’t know that...” Kita trailed off, before sighing. “Ok yes, she was always here. Stop giving me that look, Nijika-chan!”

Meanwhile, an assortment of sounds came from the stall to the right of Ryo, presumably Hitori expressing her shock that Nijika always knew.

“I’m not that thick, Kita-chan. I mean, Nijicat’s here, and Ryo never replied back to me, so...” Nijika’s voice trailed off as both girls left the bathroom.

Ryo unlocked her stall door, faceplanting onto the floor.

I’m finished.

“R-Ryo-chan?” Hitori emerged from her stall. “Is y-your ankle acting up ag-again? I can call th-them back-”

“Please. No. Leave me here to rot.” Ryo mumbled, sitting up from the floor. Thank goodness mall bathrooms here were clean. “At least the fungi that decompose me are more merciful than any Ijichi.”

“She w-won’t be that mad at you, Ryo-chan... right?”

*“*sigh* ”*

Ryo stood up and shambled over to exit the bathroom, with Hitori shuffling to her side. Though she held a concerned expression for her shambling friend, Hitori continued to walk with Ryo as they inched closer to the mall entrance. Ryo grew paler as they got close.

“You’re going t-to be ok, Ryo-chan.” Hitori awkwardly stroked Ryo’s arm. “Nijika-chan’s n-not that scary... umm, w-well, ok maybe she is sc-scary. But! She w-won’t be that scary to you?”

Ryo snickered. "I don't feel any better, but thanks Bocchi. Remember me when I die."

"Wh-wh-what???"

"What did you do to Hitori-chan, Ryo-chan?" Kita gasped as the two approached the entrance.

"She's scribbling her funeral speech for when I die. Which will be soon." Ryo sighed.

Kita and Ryo looked over to Hitori, who was fully engrossed in her notebook. Incoherent whispers and almost crazed babbling spilled out of the pinkhead's mouth. It seems the pressure of having to speak in front of many people was getting on her nerves more than Ryo's probable passing. It could be a mixture of both, with how much she was shaking.

"A-aren't you overreacting?"

"Have you seen her gut punches?"

"Ok, fair. I'll miss you, Ryo-chan." Kita gave a hug to Ryo.

"I'll do my best not to die?" Ryo gave her thumbs up, though shaky and lacking the signature Ryo confidence.

"Hitori-chan, let me help you with that!" Kita walked over to Hitori, who had her head in her notebook.

Ryo continued her walk of shame towards the two blonde sisters, the older one giggling while the younger one with a smirk on her face.

"Geez Ryo, you look like you saw a ghost." Seika snickered.

"I'm about to see mine shortly." Ryo stammered.

“Oh, don’t be so tense Ryo! I don’t even know what you and Nijicat were doing here.” Nijika said, a smirk still on her face. “I’ve got nothing to punish you on. Though, I am a liiiiitle curious, hmm~”

“W-wait, so you have no idea-” Ryo stopped herself, trying to regain her composure. “I, uhh, mean. I was just walking Nijicat around the mall. Yeah. They allow pets in here, pretty cool.”

“Right? They even allow them in stores!” Nijika added.

“Uhh, y-yeah.”

Seika snickered again. Ryo felt even more unsettled. Last time Seika snickered like that, it spelled disaster for the bassist.

“Even stores that pets definitely shouldn’t be in, because they might cause property damage. Like, say... I dunno, a shoe store?” Nijika blatantly pondered.

Yep. Disaster.

“You knew?!” Ryo flabbergasted.

Seika belted out in laughter.

“Yup. Next time, don’t use the band group chat call, Blue Blur~” Nijika teased.

I was using that the whole time???

Ryo fumbled to pull out her phone, feeling her life slip away as she saw that indeed she used the band group chat call for her secret mission. She even saw that Nijika silently joined the call right before Ryo entered the mall. How could she be so careless?

“It is kind of adorable that you went with the spy lingo stuff. Strawberry Burst. Pink Bubblegum.” Nijika commented. “Gotta hand it to you, pretty creative.”

Ryo wanted nothing more than to be buried six feet under. Maybe Nijika could do that for her. She could get started now, as Ryo collapsed onto the floor.

“Aww, don’t look so morose Ryo. I’d be more mad if Nijicat actually did any damage. But, the furball didn’t, right Nijicat?” Nijika rubbed the head of the cat. “Yeah, you didn’t. Good kitty.”

“Ryo, please get off the floor. We’re in a public place.” Seika grumbled, catching some confused glances from passersby.

“No. Let the floor eat me.” Ryo mumbled as she continued to lay there.

“Hey guys, we’re ba... aack?” Kita announced, with a now-back-to-normal Hitori by her side. Said pinkhead shrieked.

“She’s d-d-dead?!?”

“No, Bocchi-chan, she isn’t.” Nijika lightly shook Hitori. “Just teased her a bit too much, I guess.”

“Thanks Nijika-chan.” Kita thanked Nijika.

“No problem. I do need help with hauling her back.”

“Leave it to the Guitar Sisters!” Kita struck a pose. “Yes, Hitori-chan, that means you too. Ryo-chan isn’t that heavy.”

“Y-yes, Kita-chan!” Hitori saluted, making sure she didn’t slam her hand onto her forehead.

“Pfft, I’m not your superior, you goof.”

“I-I kn-knew that!”

Nijika sighed with a smile. “You two.”

Arriving back at Starry, the guitar sisters sat Ryo down on one of the chairs.

“We’ll be off now! Going to help Hitori-chan unpack all of her new clothes.” Kita hoisted the many shopping bags.

“Y-yup. Will Ryo-chan be o-ok?” Hitori pointed to the snoring bassist by a nearby table, using her cat as a pillow.

“Yeah, don’t worry. She’s not in trouble. Big trouble, anyways.” Nijika corrected. “Though next time, maybe don’t enable her stupidity.”

“It isn’t that stupid!” Kita argued.

...

“Ok, it is. Still! It’s so Hitori-chan’s shoes can be saved.” Kita pointed to Hitori’s shoes.

“Y-yeah, think about m-my shoes, Nijika-chan.” Hitori rubbed the tips of her shoes. “Scratch marks a-are hard to h-hide...”

“There are better ways to deal with it.” Nijika deadpanned.

“Like a scratch post.” Seika suggested, typing away in her usual corner.

“Or maybe get a potted plant!” PA-san exclaimed, making everyone minus Ryo look at her.

“Really?”

“Orrrr, not. I’ll, umm, just be here.”

PA-san hid behind her phone.

“We can buy Nijicat a scratch post.” Nijika said. “Though, it’ll definitely come from her pay.”

“I think she’ll be ok with it. It’s for her cat anyways, and she probably would do it.” Seika rationalised.

“Can’t you just let Ryo-chan buy it herself?” Kita asked.

“Nah.” / “No way.”

Both sisters responded.

“O-ok then?” Kita tilted her head.

Ryo-chan can definitely buy a scratching post herself. I even told her to ask her parents! Do they really not trust her to splurge all of her money?

...

Ok, those two are right on that.

“Alright, stay safe you two!” Nijika waved the guitarists off.

“We will! Bye Nijika-chan, Manager, PA-san!” / “Bye bye...”

With that, the two guitarists left Starry. The cold wind of the night seeped into the livehouse, making Nijika shiver.

“... cold...” Ryo muttered. Seems the wind stirred Ryo from her sleep.

“Morning sleepyhead.” Nijika ruffled Ryo’s hair. “Kita-chan and Bocchi-chan just left.”

Ryo snored loudly.

“Don’t go back to sleep, you bonehead!” Nijika ruffled her hair again, leaving her blue hair like a mop.

“Ok, ok, I’m up Mom.” Ryo yawned in tandem with Nijicat. “Thanks Nijicat.”

“So, did you figure out what kind of shoes Nijicat goes for?” Nijika asked, putting on a mask. She turned to check on sister, who was already wearing two masks. “Aren't two masks a bit excessive?”

Seika just gave her a look.

“Ok, fair point.”

“... school shoes.” Ryo almost whispered, somehow looking small on her seat. “Nijicat goes for school shoes.”

“Then, we'll have to buy a brown scratching post. At least your venture with Nijicat wasn't for nothing.” Nijika decided.

“That... was my idea...” Ryo hummed, clearly looking bummed out. “I'll just... bury myself here. Make my grave a landmark. We can make millions.”

Ryo slowly lowered herself off the chair, before being promptly planted on her seat again.

“C'mon Ryooo, don't be like that. I was just teasing you with all that stuff before.” Nijika poked Ryo's side. “You got the spirit. Just, probably should've had some hindsight. Did you even bring money?”

Ryo shook her head.

“I can't say I'm surprised. What I'm surprised about is that you aren't homeless yet.” Nijika poked Ryo's side again, this time getting a small giggle from the bassist.

“Oh, ha, ha, Nijika.” Ryo stated.

“That's more like the Ryo I know.”

“What do you mean? I'm always Ryo.”

“Ok, wise girl.”

“Amen to-oww.”

“That’s what I thought.”

A shared silence as Ryo played with her cat.

“Thanks Nijika.” Ryo said.

“That you aren’t dead yet?” Nijika asked.

“For being a great friend.”

Nijika almost fell off her seat at Ryo’s sudden honesty.

“W-well, gosh. Didn’t think you’d say that.” Nijika bashfully said.

“Keeps you on your toes, eh?” Ryo smirked.

“Ok, there’s the Ryo I know and love.”

“Wow, you love me. I’m honoured.”

“Oh, shut it you.” Nijika covered Ryo’s mouth before it said anything more. “By the way, I’m not buying you that scratching post.”

“Huh?” Ryo straightened up.

“Yep. Coming straight from your pay.” Seika added. “There’s nothing you can do about it, Ryo.”

“Aww...” Ryo sank.

“Gosh Ryo, you get butthurt too fast.” Nijika finally took a seat next to Ryo. “You were going to buy it anyway!”

“Maybe you’re too mean. Meanie.”

“You’re the meanie!”

“Nuh uh.”

“Yeah, you are. Don’t lie.”

“I’m not. You are though.”

“Am not!”

Seika turned to the bickering duo, exhaling in amusement.

“I’m surprised you wanted to adopt Bocchi-chan first rather than Ryo-chan.” PA-san scooted to Seika’s side. “Look at them. It’s like they are sisters.”

Seika murmured in response.

“Don’t be so grumpy, Manager~”

“I’m not.” Seika grunted.

The manager softly smiled.

“Though, I am grateful for Ryo. It can be a bit awkward with me and Niji, but for Ryo? They’re a match. Nijika gets to have someone close at her age.”

Seika pointed to the duo, who were now done with bickering and opted to laze around. Somehow, Ryo’s hands made it over to Nijika’s head, which the blonde didn’t mind.

“I can see what you mean. It’s sweet.” PA-san said. “**sigh**, wish I had a friend or sister like that.”

PA-san turned to Seika. Seika eyed precariously at her sound engineer.

“Oh no, no, no, no. Nope. Not me. Nijika is fine as is. Don’t need another sister.” Seika abruptly declined. “I’m your boss too, you weirdo.”

“I didn't say anything~”

Mall chapter. Mall chapter.

Ryo using spy lingo is 1000% in character. The other two following along is 100000% in character.

Will Nijicat ever get its scratching post?

Guess the hints for Chapter 11.

Honestly, this took longer to get out than usual. College do be making me busy. Hard to find motivation to write. I'll probably write more side-stuff before the next chapter.

Next thing I write coming out whenever!

Interlude II

Chapter 21: Interlude II

Nijika talks to a sick Hitori.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“S-sorry to, **cough* *cough**, b-bother you...” Hitori coughed into her phone.

“Nah, it’s cool. I could use the company anyways!” Nijika beamed.

It was an unfortunate day for the pinkhead, as she got suddenly struck with the flu. Hitori was more shocked than worried that she got sick, considering the amount of failed times she tried to get herself sick in the past - Hitori knew the exact amount of times, something she’ll be taking to her grave. Her body had an insane immunity system. Or she doesn’t go out a lot.

The news reached her other bandmates, who shared mutual worry over Hitori. She had to reassure the others, most especially her guitar sister, that she was fine and needed to rest. Ryo gladly translated that practice would be cancelled, to which she received a mild whack on the head by Nijika. Hitori heard from Nijika that they did try to practise, but everyone felt a little weird not having a lead guitarist. The blonde chuckled as she told Hitori how many awkward glances were thrown around the studio when it came to the instrumental parts.

“Don’t feel too bad about it, Bocchi-chan. You’re a pillar of Kessoku Band, just like the rest of us.” Nijika reassured. “If you need to rest, then we’ll wait.”

“Th-thanks, Nijika-chan.” Hitori croaked. “I-It’s just... ugh...”

Nijika heard Hitori flop onto her bed.

“I h-hate not being able to d-do anything. I can’t think st-straight, so I-
cough . Sorry, I c-can’t really write lyrics.”

“Well, can you play something for me while I work on some assignments?” Nijika asked, before adding, “My hero~”

“A-ah, sure!” Hitori screeched, which made Nijika giggle.

While Nijika worked on her remaining assignments, making sure to know the contents well in case a certain someone came asking for help, she heard Hitori rustle up a storm. She was about to tell Hitori that she really didn’t have to if she couldn’t when she heard the familiar ring from her guitar.

“Is th-this good?” Hitori asked. “I’d u-use my amp, but my parents are here...”

“You’re good, Bocchi-chan! No need for an amp. I can hear your guitar loud and clear.” Nijika affirmed.

“O-ok.”

After a minor coughing fit (Nijika forced Hitori to drink some water right after), Hitori began to play whatever came to mind. Even in her horrid state of sickness, she had enough energy to play the guitar. Ryo has a similar trait, technically being another guitarist like Hitori. Maybe it was a guitarist thing.

“S-so...” Hitori began, clearing her throat. “Wh-what happened to the others? A-a-after practice, I mean...”

Nijika smiled. Hitori was improving ever so slightly.

“We kinda went our own ways, seeing as it was our break day today. Kita-chan went back home and I think so did Ryo. Not sure what

both of them are doing.”

Nijika finished up with her work.

“Aaaaaand... done! As for me, Bocchi-chan, I just finished my assignments. Gonna do a little bit of advanced study, seeing as I have nothing else to do.”

“Wo-woah, advanced study...” Hitori marvelled, changing chords at the same time.

“Oooh, that sounds nice!”

“Th-thanks. B-but wouldn’t you want to, I-like, rest? I d-dunno, play some game on your Bintendo Smitch?”

“Ehh, that’s not... productive.” Nijika mumbled. “It’s the right thing to do anyways! I want to do well in school, so that I can help out my sister as much as I can.”

“Mmmm...” Hitori hummed, not satisfied with Nijika’s answer.

As if Nijika read her mind, Nijika sighed.

“You’re right. I did finish a chunk of assignments. Maybe I can rest for a little bit.” Nijika laughed to herself. “And I was the one who suggested you to rest, huh.”

“So-sometimes, we can be a little bit hy-hypocritical. It’s just part of being human, I g-guess.” Hitori commented.

Nijika paused her skimming of an article, surprised to hear Hitori say something... deep? Wise? She couldn’t put her finger on the right term, but something along those lines.

“A-ah, of course, it’s just m-my opinion, hehehe. Don’t take it t-too seriously.” Hitori slightly despaired. “In fact, don’t t-take it seriously at a-all...”

“Bocchi-chan... have more confidence in yourself.” Nijika said.
“Besides, I agree with what you said! Nobody’s perfect.”

“R-really?”

“Yup.”

“O-oh, ok. Hehehehe, ehehehehehehe... Nijika-chan thinks I said something cool... **cough**, hehehehe...”

Hitori’s giggling overpowered her guitar playing, being unsurprising to Nijika. She patiently waited for her to get it all out of her system. They really need to do something about how Hitori responds to compliments. Maybe get her to be more numb to them? Increase the amount of compliments?

“Onee-chaaaaaaaan!” Futari’s voice blared through Nijika’s phone’s speakers. “You have visitors!”

“M-me?” Hitori stopped playing. “Who wo-would visit me? While I’m s-sick?”

“It’d be funny if it was Ryo and Kita-chan.” Nijika joked. “You have a face mask on, right?”

“Y-yeah? I don’t want to burden anyone e-else with my sickness-”

“Hitori-chan! Hi!” Kita’s voice entered. Nijika hummed in victory.
“Don’t mind our... outfits. Ryo-chan picked them. Actually, why do you have these lying around in your home?”

“My parents are doctors. These are for emergencies.” Ryo explained. “This is an emergency. Bocchi is sick and needs immediate care.”

“G-guys? I’m f-fine.” Hitori reasoned. “Just need to r-rest a bit.”

“Nonsense. Trust me Bocchi. My parents are doctors. I have doctor's blood running through my veins.”

“Ryo, that’s not how it works.” Nijika deadpanned, loud enough so that Ryo wouldn’t miss it, even if she tried.

“Ignore her. She doesn’t have doctor’s blood.”

“Ryo-chan? D-don’t mute Nijika-chan...” Hitori weakly protested.
“She was keeping me company.”

“You have us, Bocchi. She’s probably busy with studying or something.”

“We didn’t come here just to greet you, Hitori-chan. We can stay with you. These suits are legit!” Kita said.

“W-w-wouldn’t it be better if y-you both stayed away from m-me?”
Hitori protested again.

“Guys, Bocchi-chan has a point. Give her some space.” Nijika stated.

“Nah. I wanna spend some time with you.” Ryo ignored Nijika’s comment.

“Me too! I can’t stay away from my guitar sister!” Kita’s aura shone.
Somehow, even Nijika felt it.

Right. Ryo muted me. The gall of that girl...

“W-wait, Kita-chan, st-stay back! I’m sick...” Hitori coughed. “P-please... hnnng!”

“Mmmmm! There! A hug a day keeps the doctor away, or something like that!” Kita said.

“That doesn’t make sense at all...” Nijika groaned.

“Let me help you make a healthy meal. I will taste test to ensure that the food is right for you.” Ryo said. “Where is your fridge?”

“Ryo-chan. Really?” Kita said. “And... there she goes. I’ll make sure she doesn’t eat up everything and that she actually makes you something. Hang tight!”

Hitori only squeaked some sort of noise of confirmation.

With the steps of Kita growing more distant, Hitori spoke.

“S-sorry for that, Nijika-chan.” Hitori apologised.

“Don’t be. I’ll have words with them later.” Nijika grumbled. “At least they’re doing it out of love. A surprise visit isn’t so bad!”

“Y-yeah.”

The next time Nijika saw the bassist and vocalist, she made sure to wear an extra mask. So much for the suits.

Being sick sucks. I'm not sick right now, but being sick sucks.

Just because your parents are doctors, doesn't make you a doctor. Ryo thinks otherwise.

A chill side-story I wrote right after I finished Chapter 10. I have no idea why I write this much right after I just wrote a ton. Brain worky weird.

Next thing I write comes out whenever!

Interlude III

Chapter 22: Interlude III

Hitori notices all the affection she receives.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Hitori thinks.

Not because she's in trouble, nor is she overthinking. Well, maybe she was overthinking, but for good reason.

She would consider herself as a thoughtful person; one of the perks of being an introvert. Her preference of losing herself in thought rather than interacting with a human being led her to thinking pretty often - go figure. It wasn't a bad thing; at least, nobody told her that it was. In fact, her bandmates appreciate the work of her brain, especially when it comes to her way of visualising. They appreciate less when she actually turns into some of the things Hitori thinks of herself, but she'd like to think that she does that less often. She hasn't morphed into anything weird in the past week!

She was growing as a person. Or as a Bocchi, whatever that meant from Ryo.

But she digresses. Hitori thinks.

Her thoughts led her to one thing. A burning question. One that really perplexes her. She wasn't the brightest person, yet she felt that even the smartest minds couldn't give her a straight answer.

Context: she doesn't know many smart people. Ryo definitely didn't count.

Focus Hitori! Your question!

So, now she must ask. Someone she knew she could both trust and can provide a suitable answer to her undying question.

“N-Nijika-chan?”

Nijika was smart in Hitori’s eyes.

“Yeah, what’s up Bocchi-chan?” Nijika looked up from wiping a table, tilting her head. “You’ve been drilling a hole into the floor with your gaze. Might need to replace that floor tile if you keep that up.”

“Ah, hehehehe, y-yeah...”

“Soooooooo?” Nijika pressed on.

“R-right! Umm...” Hitori shuffles in her place, the blonde ever so patient to let her get her thoughts out. “H-have you noticed something... d-different?”

“Uhh, like?”

“I g-guess you guys have b-been more, umm, uhh, w-well...” Hitori struggled. “A-affectionate... to m-me...”

“Hmm?” Nijika stops wiping to give some more thought. “Now that I stop and think about it, yeah. We have been, huh.”

“E-even Manager so-sometimes gives me headpats.” Hitori craned her head to Seika, who was at her typical spot doing her typical work on her typical device. “At l-least, I th-think they are headpats...”

“Yeah, she’s-WAIT!” Nijika bolted towards Seika. “S/S! You gave Bocchi-chan headpats, but not *me* ?!?”

“Wha-hugh?” Seika almost fell over her stool. “Haaah, don’t scare me like that.”

“Explain. Now!”

“G-give me a moment...” Seika heaved. “Nearly gave y-your sister a heart attack, geez...”

Hitori watched as Seika collected herself, while Nijika went to the bar for a drink. Probably for some pineapple juice.

“W-way to greet your sister...” Hitori muttered.

“I know, right?” a voice said.

Hitori raised an eyebrow. That wasn’t inside her head, right? It even sounded different to her normal thinking voice.

Kind of sounds like-

“Kita-chan?” Hitori flinched, finding the redhead embracing her. “H-how long have y-you been here?”

“Hahaha, I dunno...” Kita blushed. “Wanted to last longer, heh.”

Hitori heard from behind a familiar sound. The sound of a phone recording ending.

“Sorry Bocchi, I couldn’t stop her.” Ryo approached, holding her phone in her hand. “At least it made for some funny footage. She was there for a solid seven minutes.”

“Wh-what?” Hitori squabbled.

“Ooh, ooh, lemme see!” Kita detached from the pinkhead and zipped by Ryo’s phone. “Nice, you got my wink too!”

“I can’t believe this...” Nijika came back with a tray of drinks, grumbling. “So it’s awkward between us, but if it’s you Bocchi-chan, she’s alllllll good. It just doesn’t make sense!”

Hitori ignored the implications of Nijika's statement, whether it meant that she was on Seika's watchlist or she was getting somewhat pampered by the older sister - which is weird in itself.

Is it normal for someone's boss to give their employees special treatment? What if they were a min-

Nijika began to place each cup onto the table, shaking Hitori out of her brief thoughts. Great timing; she really didn't want to continue that train of thought. Hitori hesitantly took a cup, finding the drinks to be pineapple juice. They must be still desperate to get rid of their stock.

"Y-you don't think i-it's weird?" Hitori asked, taking a sip. It's alright.

"What's weird, Hitori-chan?" Kita turned her attention to Hitori, making Ryo look over too.

"W-well... ehehehehe, a-actually, it might just be-"

"She thinks we've been too affectionate with her." Nijika speaks before Hitori starts to backtrack.

Though Hitori reacts in her typical fashion - that is, she nearly chokes on air, having Kita come over to soothe her - she's grateful for Nijika.

"Have we?" Ryo asked, before slurping half of her pineapple juice.

"Ryo, you're the most oblivious out of all of us." Nijika deadpanned. "You saying that is kind of expected."

"Ok, wow. Rude."

"I agree with her, Ryo-chan." Kita nodded. She swirled her drink around a little.

"You too? That's just rude squared."

“B-b-back to my, umm, thingy...” Hitori tried to redirect back to what she was saying, but the best she could do was mumble it out. Nevertheless, her bandmates gave her their full attention.

“A-uhh-umm.” Hitori stuttered, fiddling with her cup to shake off the pressure of having everyone looking at her. “D-don’t you guys think it’s, w-well, weird? M-maybe that’s j-just me... sorry...”

“Don’t apologise, Hitori-chan!” Kita said. “You’re not used to it, it’s ok.”

“Yeah. Ryo over here doesn’t do hugs.” Nijika poked at Ryo.

“Rude... uhh, what’s after squared?” Ryo asked.

“Cubed, Ryo. Cubed.”

“Yeah. That. Rude cubed.”

“I don’t think there’s anything weird about it, Bocchi-chan. Being close with friends means you get to touch-I mean be physically intimate. Or something like that.” Nijika stated. “There probably is a better way of saying that-”

Ryo snickered.

“Shut it, Ryo.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Ryo protested.

“Anyways, me and Ryo are touchy-feely all the time. See?”

To prove her point, Nijika poked Ryo’s cheek.

“Poke.” Nijika said.

“Yeah, Bocchi, see? Normal.”

“Poke.”

“Ok, you made your-”

“Poke.”

“Stop it, Nijika.”

“Poke.”

“Ugh, whatever...” Ryo continued to drink.

While Nijika continued to poke Ryo (the latter having to swat away Nijika’s finger while she drank), Kita asked, “Are you feeling uncomfortable with me? I’m a big advocate for being touchy, but I can tone down all the hugs and stuff.”

“I-it’s fine, Kita-chan. J-just not used to it, like Nijika-chan s-said...” Hitori smiled. “Ac-actually, you do help me g-get somewhat u-used to it.”

“Really?” Kita’s aura shone.

“Urk, y-yes.” Hitori winced. She should probably get her eyes checked someday. This amount of exposure to the Sun is bad for her eyes.

“So, yeah.” Nijika poked Ryo’s cheek one more time, for good measure. “Nothing wrong with it. Eventually, it won’t feel weird. You’re not wrong, Bocchi-chan.”

“Yep.” Ryo affirmed, giving her signature thumbs up.

“What is wrong though,” Nijika turned to Ryo. “is you.”

“Me? Now this is just... eh hh, umm. Nijika, help.”

“I don’t think there is a name for the 4th power?”

“Yeah, same!” Kita agreed. “Might be a bit advanced for our maths.”

“Oh. Well. That’s just... 4th power rude.”

Boom. Still works. Genius Ryo, genius.

“Ok, but what’s wrong with me? I’m breathing, my ankle is alright, and I can play the bass perfectly. I even eat my vegetables.”

“Ryo, grass doesn’t count.”

“It’s green. And healthy. Did you know I’m part cow?”

“What?” / “Wh-what?”

“Ignore her. Anyways... you don’t do any hugging and stuff!” Nijika flailed her hands. “The best you do is headpats! Which I don’t mind, but still! You don’t even do that with your own family!”

“Nijika-chan, is this your way of saying that you want more hugs from Ryo-chan?” Kita smugly accused.

“N-no!”

A pause.

“Ok, yes! But my point still stands! Ryo’s weird!”

“R-Ryo-chan is always weird though...” Hitori stated. “A-ah, I don’t mean th-that in a bad way! Please d-don’t-”

“It’s cool, Bocchi. I getcha.” Ryo nodded, making Hitori sigh in relief. “But I guess the accused has to explain herself, huh.”

“Ryo, I wasn’t accusing you of-”

“First. Have you seen my physique?” Ryo presented herself, bringing a silent “Woah.” of astonishment from Kita.

“Yeah, we see you everyday.” Nijika stated, taking a little sip.

“I’m like a skeleton. I’m also tall. See?” Ryo raised her hand to her height, which made everyone look up.

“T-true. How did you g-get so tall...” Hitori muttered.

“I know hugging tall people is awkward.” Kita agreed, nodding along.
“So, I guess that’s valid?”

Nijika started to snicker.

“Nijika, no. Don’t make a repeat. I didn’t even say his name.” Ryo lightly scolded, ruffling Nijika’s hair.

“H-hey! My hair is p-precious!” Nijika protested, almost cracking into full laughter. She slapped her cheeks lightly.

“H-haah, hoo... ok, I’m good. It’s not funny. Not funny.”

Hitori and Kita glanced at the two, confused.

“I’ll tell you guys later.” Ryo said. “But back to me. Second. I don’t do hugs.”

“She’s like an alien, even to her own family.” Nijika added. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you hug your parents.”

“Correction: I never initiated a hug. They hug me often.” Ryo pointed out. “Too often...”

“Umm, ackthually...”

“Shush, Nijika.”

Nijika giggled.

“But yeah, she’s right. I probably hugged Nijika less than ten times in my lifetime.”

“Woah, that’s amazing!” Kita dazzled. “I don’t think I can go about my day without a single hug.”

“M-must be nice...” Hitori sagged. “It takes a-a lot from me to even ac-accept one... still feels weird...”

“That’s why I’m here! To get you to be hug-ready! Or something like that.”

“Hehehehe, o-ok...”

“Ok Ryo. But unlike Bocchi-chan here, you can hug people.” Nijika commented. “Actually, you like hugs!”

“No I don’t.”

“Yeah, you do. You basically melted in my arms when we did it the first time.”

“Aww...” Kita cooed.

“No, I did not. Slander.” Ryo grumbled.

“Aaaand, you only don’t like getting them from your parents because they’re your parents!”

“I-it’s cringe at my age...” Ryo mumbled.

“That’s subjective!”

“H-h-how about...” Hitori spoke up, making the band again give her their full attention. “*ahem*, h-how about we d-do what Kita-chan does with m-me?”

“Which is?” Ryo raised her eyebrow.

“I give Hitori-chan a hug everyday!” Kita exclaimed. “There hasn’t been a single day where I haven’t hugged her!”

“W-what?”

“Hmm, actually...” Nijika pondered. “This could help you be less weird. C’mon Ryo, humour them. At least a week!”

“Nuh uh, nope.”

Ryo got up to leave to... probably mop the floor. Yeah. It looked really dirty, with how it... glimmered. Curses. Maybe she could make it even more clean.

She was halted by Nijika standing right in front of her.

“Nijika?”

“If Bocchi-chan can do it, then so can you!” Nijika said.

“Yeah! I give amazing hugs!” Kita appeared right beside Nijika.
“There aren’t so bad, Ryo-chan.”

“Heheheheheh, y-yeah Ryo-chan...” Hitori slithered to Nijika’s left.
“In the f-future, you might need to h-hug someone.”

Ryo frantically looked left and right, finding her options of escape non-existent. They were cornering her, like a sad animal. She felt the betrayal from her fellow introvert Hitori, and the exuding pressure from the extroverts. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

“G-guys?” Ryo stammered. “Funny joke, haha. You guys can s-stop now.”

“Oh, this isn’t a joke Ryo.” Nijika approached menacingly, slowly extending her arms for a hug. “This is a group hug.”

“S-stay back! You can’t d-do this!”

“It’ll help with the band’s morale~”

“Get away from me!”

“Too late!” Kita shouted, before pouncing on Ryo with the rest of the girls.

“You sure you can walk back home by yourself?” Nijika asked, patting Ryo on the shoulder. The bassist slightly flinched at the touch.

“Sorry. We took it too far, huh.”

“... it’s cool.” Ryo hummed, looking into Nijika’s unconvinced eyes. “Really.”

Red eyes soften their gaze on Ryo.

“Ok then. Take care, Ryo!”

“I will.”

With that, Ryo strolled down the streets of Shimokitazawa. She wasn’t in the mood to window shop the nearby stores, nor did she want to ogle at things she couldn’t afford. She’d be surprising her parents with her early arrival, but more than anything she wanted to go home.

The group hug the band gave her was... something. She felt the warm embrace of Nijika, overpowered by Kita’s uncomfortable tight grip and Hitori’s mild shaking. She didn’t like that her personal space was breached, and now that she thought about it, perhaps she should’ve made that clear. Then, they wouldn’t have violated her up like that.

(Ryo was aware that was a bit of hyperbole, but it was a little funny.)

If only she could be more direct. Ironical, since she probably was the most blunt person in the group.

Ryo sighed, her body swaying from the shifting weight of her bass. They didn't get to play much today, with Nijika calling an abrupt stop to practise. The blonde kept shooting her glances, seeing as her bass skills weren't up to par as usual; when Ryo messed up on the same part of the song they were practising for the third time, that's when she called for a cancellation.

It sucked, but it is what it is. Surprisingly, the two guitarists did give her some space as they packed up to leave. Kita didn't swarm over her, and Hitori avoided her like the plague. She felt bad and did want to explain that she just didn't like people in her personal space, but Nijika kept pushing her out the door. She knew that Ryo needed home time. Maybe Ryo could text them later when she got back home.

Ryo sighed again. She probably shouldn't have been so affected by their affection. They're her friends.

"Meow!" A familiar sound.

"Nijicat?" Ryo turned to the approaching furball, who had transported itself to Ryo's arms. She held her cat, cradling the cat until it began to purr.

"Heh, you always like to snuggle, huh." Ryo said. "Wonder how you ended up a stray."

Ryo played with Nijicat's paws. The cat mewed in satisfaction, giving Ryo's hand a high-five.

Ryo grinned like an idiot.

Maybe hugs aren't that bad.

It was very awkward, yes. Kita could have lessened her grip a bit, Hitori's shaking could have been left at home, but it was... nice? Almost as if... Ryo wouldn't mind having more? Maybe?

Ryo groaned. Nijika was right. She was a sucker for hugs.

Not from her family though. There's a difference. She gets plenty of those.

Ryo didn't even realise she made it to her front door until her head knocked onto wood. She was too engrossed in giving cuddles to Nijicat and thinking about hugs, some things that she would never have thought of until now.

I'm... home?

The door swung open to reveal her mother, almost making Ryo drop Nijicat.

"Hi Ryo~" Ryo's mother greeted her. "Surprised to see-m-me?"

Ryo's mother staggered as she got 'essentially-body-tackled' by her own daughter. She then slowly wrapped her arms around her mother.

The hug was very awkward, probably worse than the one she received earlier. But, it was honest. Very Ryo-like.

"Nice to see you too, Ryo." Ryo's mother hugged her back. "What makes you come early?"

"... practice ended early." Ryo mumbled into Ryo's mother.

"Well, that just means more family time. Unless you have something to do?"

The two let go of each other, with Nijicat making itself at home as it scurried into the Yamada household.

"Nah. We can watch a movie or something." Ryo said. "Oh, and Nijicat's here too."

On cue, Ryo's father yelped. "What are you doing here, little fella? Nearly scared the life out of me..."

"Haah, that's your father." Ryo's mother chuckled. "Well, don't just stand out there, come in and choose our movie!"

Ryo hummed.

Yeah. Hugs aren't so bad.

"C'mon Mom, you know we're watching Sharknado II."

"But Ryo, dear. We always watch that. How about something else?"

"Mom, it's the best movie in the universe. We can't not watch it."

Ryo then proceeds to watch Sharknado II with her family for the 10391434th time.

Getting hugs from family is nice, but we can all agree that it can get sickening at some point. Hits different when your friends hug you.

Koala Kita. Koala Kita.

Sorry for the super slowdown of writing! College is getting tougher and though I have a lot on my backlog (I literally have a chapter and three side-stories on the ready, just need to actually write them), I'm finding it hard to find motivation to write. So, uhh, expect less. Yeah.

Also, wow I really didn't expect so many people to read my stuff. Thank you to everyone, seriously.

Next thing I write coming out whenever!

Chapter 11

Chapter 23: Chapter 11

Hitori convinces the Kitas about Kessoku Band. To her surprise, backup arrives.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It was a beautiful day outside. Though it was a little too hot for Hitori's taste, the birds and cicadas doing their thing made walking quite enjoyable. Clear skies, trees in sight and the place empty of any vehicles. Hitori breathed in the fresh air.

Before breathing out a shaky breath, almost letting out the despair building up inside her.

"A-ah, ac-actually..." Hitori stammered. "Maybe we sh-should've brought Nijika-chan for-"

"Mmm, mmm, nope!" Kita cut her off. "You told me you wanted to do this yourself, so don't go backtracking now!"

"R-right..."

After a few weeks of deliberating and weighing her options, with a little prodding from Kita herself, Hitori finally decided to pay her family a visit to help Kita persuade them about Kessoku Band. She's been dreading the day, despite the many reassurances Kita kept telling her. Realistically, Hitori knew it wouldn't be too bad. They were just going to have a friendly conversation about Kita's involvement in Kessoku Band, hoping that in the end the Kitas would respect and maybe even support Kita's endeavours.

Now if only she actually listened to her rationality.

“Hey.” Kita looked over to Hitori, stopping the pinkhead from slamming her fist into her head. “Have some confidence in yourself. I know you’ll do alright. You taught me everything I know, right?”

Hitori meekly nodded.

“Then channel some of that teacher's energy!”

Hitori squinted from the exuding aura. She doesn’t even know what ‘teacher’s energy’ is.

“Th-thanks.”

“See! Even the others are cheering you on!” Kita shoved her phone in Hitori’s face.

“Good luck, Bocchi-chan! I’ll be by my phone if ever you need help from me!”

“knock em dead bocchi”

“Please don’t! I’m sure the Kitas are lovely people.”

“leave no witnesses”

“Shut it Ryo.”

Hitori chuckled at the messages. Even far apart, they still have her back.

Well, I better not disappoint...

Her look of worry didn’t leave her face.

“Thanks guys.” Hitori spoke out loud as she texted on her own phone.

“Hitori-chan.” Kita placed her hand on Hitori.

“Y-yes?”

“I’m...” Kita sighed. “I’m sorry for putting pressure on you. It’s ok if you can’t convince them. My mother’s the most hard-headed person in the universe!”

“Heh.” Hitori snickered. “But, y-you trust me with this. Means a lot to me, Kita-chan.”

Kita smiled in response.

“A-and, if you trust m-me with this, then maybe I sh-should trust myself with this too.”

“That’s the spirit!” Kita lightly whacked Hitori on the back. “Now, let’s go! I heard my grandma’s home to visit!”

“Wh-what?”

*M-more people? I thought it was only us and Kita-chan’s parents!
No, no, no, no, no! Too much pressure!*

“Hitori-chan? D-don’t melt on the sidewalk!”

“There.” Kita finished with the final touches. “Good as new!”

“Thanks Kita-chan...” The pink blob replied, slowly regaining her original form. “W-where are we?”

“Just outside my house.”

Hitori took a step back, clutching her heart as if a stake went through it.

“We’re already a bit late, so we can’t keep them waiting any longer Hitori-chan.” Kita said. “Are you sure you want to push through with

this? I'll do my best to make sure they understand."

Hitori lightly blushed at Kita's consideration.

"I-it's ok, Kita-chan." Hitori breathed out. "I'll n-never be ready, but I have to be there. For your sake."

Kita's heart skipped a beat as she hid her face, grabbing Hitori's wrist to drag her to her front door.

I swear, this girl says the coolest things without even knowing it!

"Mrrow?"

Both guitarists turned their heads to the sidewalk, finding Nijicat walking over to the pair.

"Nijicat?" Hitori tilted her head in confusion. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Ryo-chan told me that sometimes, she lets Nijicat wander around." Kita explained, giving said cat some ruffles. "Didn't know Nijicat wandered around my place."

Hitori's phone then vibrated. She pulled it out to reveal a private message from Ryo. She scrolled past the many song ideas, song recommendations (most of which coming from the bassist) and memes to find her message.

"i assume my cat is with yall?"

"How do you know, Ryo-chan?"

"echo location. i'm part dolphin."

"Right."

"dang, miss killjoy got to you too?"

“Ryo-chan, I’m going to meet my doom shortly.”

“oh right. mb.”

“take nijicat with you. that cat does wonders.”

Hitori looked up to check on Nijicat, finding Kita playing with the feline.

“Sure. Someone’s got to take care of your cat.”

“is that sass i detect? sassy bocchi?”

“ok, but fr. good luck.”

“Thanks, Ryo-chan.”

“K-Kita-chan.” Hitori called out. “B-bring Nijicat with us.”

“Oh?” Kita stopped her petting spree. “Oh, yeah sure! C’mere you. You’re going to visit my family!”

Kita walked up to the front door, Nijicat in her arms. She turned back to see Hitori just behind her, trembling slightly.

The pinkhead gave a shaky thumbs up, eliciting a giggle from Kita. She rang the doorbell.

“I think that’s your daughter. Go get the door!” An elderly voice can be heard inside the house.

“Yeah, yeah.” A stern, feminine voice hummed from the inside.

The door swung open to reveal Kita’s mother, holding a cup of tea.

“Ah, Ikuyo. You’re here.” Kita’s mother smiled. “And... a cat?”

“Oh, this is Nijicat!” Kita held the feline up. “Our bassist takes care of it!”

“Well, nice to meet you, Nijicat.” Kita’s mother lightly petted the cat. “I’m... I’m guessing the girl who dove into our bushes is Gotoh-san?”

“Huh?” Kita whipped her head to see Hitori’s eyes peering through a nearby bush. “Hitori-chan!”

“Wh-who’s Hitori-chan?” The bush spoke. “I am B-Bush-chan. Yes. The one you sp-speak of is not here. I think. How would I kn-know? I’m just a b-bush...”

“Excuse me for a moment, Mom.” Kita placed Nijicat on the porch as she went over to the bush, dragging out Hitori. She then picked out the little leaves and branches stuck in Hitori’s hair.

“This is Gotoh Hitori! My classmate, guitar teacher and bandmate!” Kita introduced the pinkhead.

“H-hi...” Hitori waved.

Why did you do that little stunt, Hitori? Now her mother must think that you’re a nut job or something! Why, oh why, oh-

“Hi Gotoh-san. You’re funny.” Kita’s mother slightly giggled.

“Wh-whaughauhguhag-”

“She means ‘thank you’, Mom.” Kita spoke for Hitori. “I think.”

“Well, the both of you, come in. We just made tea.” Kita’s mother gestured into the Kita household. “Oh, and Grandma’s here.”

“Really? Yay!” Kita dashed in, taking off her shoes at lightning speeds. “Grandma!”

“O-oh! Oof! Hi there, Ikuyo.” Kita’s grandma spoke from inside the house. “My, I’ll never get used to how tall you are!”

“Come in, Gotoh-san.” Kita’s mother ushered the pinkhead. “We don’t bite.”

“A-ah, yes” Hitori automatically responded, scooping up Nijicat. “Sorry for intruding...”

Hitori took a look around Kita’s house. It was a modest house, something that Hitori didn’t expect. She expected a lot more glitz or glamour around the household, but other than family pictures and basic decorations, there wasn’t anything eye catching. It felt like a whiplash compared to Kita’s personality.

Was that normal? Comparing someone’s house to their personality? Hitori’s house was quite plain and normal, which she thought reflects herself pretty well. Minus the normal.

“Here, sit.” Kita’s mother gestured Hitori to their couch. “I’ll go get you some tea.”

“A-ah, thank you, m-ma’am Kita...” Hitori bowed, taking a seat on their couch. It was very fluffy as she felt herself slowly sink more into it. She could probably be absorbed by the couch if she sat there long enough, were it not for Kita stopping her from sinking further.

“Hitori-chan~” Kita sang. “I know my couch is the best, but you can’t hide in there either.”

“Hehehehe, eheheehehe, it’s soooo f-fluffy...” Hitori bobbed up and down on the couch.

“Hehe, your friend is amusing.” Kita’s grandma chimed in, making Hitori freeze. “Quirky too.”

“Be kind to her, Grandma.” Kita said. “Hitori-chan is a bit, err, peculiar.”

“Oh, ho ho. I can tell. Your grandfather is quite similar to her, ha ha.”

“R-really?” Hitori unfroze, before mumbling again, “R-really...”

“Well, I don’t mind you listening in, Gotoh-san.”

“Yeah! Grandma’s stories are the best!” Kita beamed.

“Ah, o-ok... if you d-don’t mind...” Hitori scooted closer to Kita’s grandma. She placed Nijicat to snooze on the floor as Kita’s grandma recounted her days of youth, back when she met Kita’s grandpa.

Kita’s mother entered the living room, finding Kita and her friend to be listening intently to her mother’s stories. Honestly, Kita acted like a kid sometimes.

“It took almost a week to get him out of the closet!” Kita’s grandma chuckled. “He kept saying that he’d rather pass away than do any more public speaking.”

“But isn’t Grandpa really good at that?” Kita asked.

“Exactly. Who do you think pushed him to get better?”

Hitori had her mouth agape in awe. Maybe she could get help from Kita’s grandmother! Then, she’ll be-

“Gotoh-san. Here.” Kita’s mother nudged Hitori, who instantly screeched. “G-geez. Your tea.”

“A-ah, s-s-s-sorry!” Hitori immediately bowed. “I’ll make it u-up to you! You can h-hire me as your personal as-assistant! I can cl-clean stuff for you; I’m r-real good at that, my family can v-vouch for me. O-o-or, I could take care of y-your mother! Yeah!”

Kita’s mother blinked. Before she giggled.

“I’ll... keep that in mind.”

“Mooom, don’t encourage her!” Kita groaned. “Don’t listen to her, you’re good Hitori-chan.”

“M-m-maybe I can help you with y-your taxes?!? Or h-help you run for president of J-Japan?” Hitori spouted, swirls in her eyes.

“Hitori-chaaaaan~” Kita lightly shook Hitori. “Snap out of it~”

“She has a bright imagination.” Kita’s mother noted as she placed Hitori’s tea on the table.

“I agree. Gives her charm, doesn’t it?” Kita’s grandma agreed.

Kita sighed. “Yeah, it does. She’s my guitar sister!”

“What?” Kita’s mother asked.

At once, Hitori shook out of her spiral.

“Ah, r-right!” Hitori exclaimed, again bowing in front of Kita’s mother. “P-please don’t h-hate Kita-chan for being in Kessoku Band!”

A pause.

“Kess... soku... Band? Isn’t that a pun?” Kita’s grandma asked.

“Yes, mother. Actually, me and Gotoh-san have something to discuss.” Kita’s mother said.

“Shouldn’t I join you two, Mom?” Kita asked. “It does concern with-”

“No, Ikuyo. Enjoy your time with Grandma.” Kita’s mother insisted. “She’s going back first thing tomorrow, you know.”

Kita looked as if she was going to protest, but sighed instead. “Fine. Don’t be too harsh on her, Mom.”

“Wh-what?” Hitori peeped.

“Ikuyo, we’re just going to have a little chat. That’s all.” Kita’s mother said, walking into the dinning area. “Don’t forget your tea, Gotoh-san. Wouldn’t want your tea to go cold.”

Hitori stayed still, petrified that she was being singled out. She thought that she would have the dreaded conversation with Kita, being as it was about her involvement in the band. She couldn't budge or make any of herself follow Kita's mother, as if every atom of her being begged her not to go. It wasn't that Kita's mother was scary - ok, maybe she was a little bit. But the fact that she was going to have such an important conversation that determines Kita's life... it scared her. There was too much pressure.

She really thought she was ready, even after her preparation.

"Hitori-chan." Kita's voice pierced through her thoughts, as Hitori looked up to see Kita's hand on her shoulder. "You're brave for coming here, you know that?"

"Huh?"

"You're defending my place in the band, convincing my mother of all people!"

"Oh ho ho, my daughter is the most stubborn person I've met." Kita's grandma chimed in. "I'm not sure what you will talk about, or what the, err, Kessoku Band thingy is. But I know it will be important. Saw it in my daughter's face, I'll tell you what."

Hitori sank further into the couch. She didn't need a reminder on the gravity of the conversation.

"Have more confidence in yourself, Hitori-chan. You know how much I've done because of your teaching. How much I've done for the band." Kita smiled. "And besides, you can say some pretty cool stuff when you want to."

"R-really?"

"Yeah really! If I were to talk with my mom, honestly we'd just argue. That's why I needed your help."

Hitori stayed silent for a while.

Right. Kita-chan's counting on me. I can't let her down!

"Ok. I'm g-going in." Hitori said, with newfound steeled resolve.

"That's the spirit, Gotoh-san." Kita's grandma affirmed. "Word of advice: don't be too intimidated. She talks serious, but she just really cares for Ikuyo here."

"And bring Nijicat with you!" Kita held up Nijicat. "This cat helped me be honest with you... so I'm sure Nijicat can do the same for you!"

"Th-thanks." Hitori accepted Nijicat into her arms, who curled up quite snug.

Yeah, I can do this. Nijicat, give me strength!

Taking her cup of tea (thanking the people who design teacups that her tea was still hot), she walked over to where Kita's mother disappeared to.

"So, you two are dating, right?"

"G-Grandma! No, we aren't!"

"What? I'm not against it."

"Ah, Gotoh-san. Please, take a seat." Kita's mother gestured to the seat across from her. "And don't look too tense. We're just here to talk."

Hitori shuffled towards her seat, sitting down as she kept Nijicat on her lap. She shakily took a sip of her tea.

"K-kind of hard n-n-not to be nervous, ma'am." Hitori mumbled.

“Oh. Sorry if I’m coming on too strong. I really did just want to talk with you, without any distractions and all.” Kita’s mother apologised.

She took a sip of her tea.

“You know, Ikuyo really looks up to you.” Kita’s mother admitted, making Hitori perk up. “You teach her guitar, right?”

“Y-yes! She’s made g-great progress!” Hitori added.

“I can tell. Even though I’ve never been into music, I can tell that you’ve taught her well. Her mini-performances she does for the family are adorable.”

Another sip.

“She talks about you a lot. So don’t worry. Your weirdness is charming.” Kita’s mother winked.

“Awawaw-gak! Th-thanks?” Hitori choked on her tea, eliciting a giggle from Kita’s mother.

I feel like she said that on purpose...

“You’re not like Ikuyo’s other friends. T-that’s a good thing, mind you.” Kita’s mother reassured. “She hasn’t had anyone who really touched her life like you did. Well, maybe other than that green-haired girl...”

“Ehehehehe, th-thanks...” Hitori bashfully said. “I m-make sure to t-take care of your daughter. She’s a g-good friend to me too.”

“Glad to hear. Thank you also for being so honest with me.” Kita’s mother nodded.

Kita’s mother sighed.

“Though, while I am glad to see Ikuyo have a bit more spring in her step... I can’t help but worry if she continues down this route.”

Hitori gulped.

"I am sure you are aware of how... hmm, how do I put this nicely? How some musicians live their lives?" Kita's mother asked.

"Y-yes, ma'am." Hitori shuddered at thinking of... certain bassists.

"In addition, I've heard that being in the music industry is quite unsustainable. I don't think there has been a week that has passed without Ikuyo worrying over something in your band."

"A-ah."

Kita-chan's really open with her mother...

"And, she does work hard. Really hard. I have you to thank for that." Kita's mother admitted. "But, it's affecting other parts of her life. Her grades have gone lower, she's spending less time with her other friends and she almost spends her whole free time on her guitar."

Hitori didn't know Kita was going all in for the band. She's touched by her commitment, but doesn't know what to feel that she was neglecting other parts of her life.

"I don't blame her for not telling you, judging by your expression Gotoh-san. She can be secretive when she wants to be. Ha, believe me." Kita's mother chuckled.

"Y-y-yeah. She can be..." Hitori awkwardly agreed.

Another sip. Kita's mother poured more tea into her cup.

"Tea?" Kita's mother offered.

"A-ah, I'm good. T-thank you, ma'am." Hitori declined, eyeing her still full cup.

"Back to what I was saying, it's affecting other parts of her life. I know what it's like for your passion to consume you, and I'm starting to see

that with Ikuyo. You tend to tunnel vision when you're so caught up with what you love doing, and you end up forgetting important things to do."

Hitori nodded. She was very familiar with this. The amount of assignments she almost missed to submit because of how engrossed she was with playing the guitar, or making new lyrics, or even just thinking of new song ideas to share with the band. That was not even factoring in procrastination, which Hitori had a bad habit of doing.

"I'm worried for Ikuyo, Gotoh-san. I'm sure your band has talented, driven musicians. Including yourself. But, Ikuyo isn't. She only started this music stuff just last year, and while she has made great progress, I have not seen nor heard any of the success from your band."

Hitori took a sip, opting to remain silent.

"If I am being honest, I... don't see a bright future for Ikuyo if she continues with your band. It's unsustainable, with a rocky foundation. I rather have her pursue something concrete than a passion." Kita's mother almost said with a scowl. She looked over to Hitori, who had her eyes widened at her sudden change of demeanour.

"Sorry for being blunt, Gotoh-san. I mean no ill will to you and your band." Kita's mother composed herself. "But, please understand where I am coming from. I am only looking out for my daughter and her future."

Hitori was about to agree with Kita's mother, before stopping herself. If she were to agree right now, wouldn't that mean that she... lost? She hasn't refuted any of Kita's mother's points; on the contrary, she actually agrees with them.

But, she was here for a reason. To defend Kita when she couldn't herself.

(Hitori ignored how cool that sounded. Maybe Kita was right about that.)

Keeping her hands rubbing on Nijicat, who very much enjoyed the pets, Hitori spoke.

"I-it sounds like you h-had experiences with b-broken dreams...?" Hitori sort of asked.

Another sip.

"Yes, Gotoh-san. Truth be told, I used to be a novelist. Not the greatest, but I really loved writing." Kita's mother smiled. "It was something my parents were split on. My dad hated it, while my mother was super supportive. My mother always loved a good story - heh, it's why her stories are always so engaging. I don't blame Ikuyo for being excited every time she told a story."

Hitori smiled. She saw some adoration in Kita's mother's eyes. She was confident that she truly did love what she did before.

"S-so, what made you st-stop ma'am?" Hitori hesitantly asked.

"I got laid off. Fired. The publisher that published my works said they needed to do that so that they could continue to function. There wasn't anything I could do."

"A-ah." Hitori responded. She's heard of horror stories in the music industry (people were very vocal on the internet), recalling some recounts of music labels screwing over musicians and bands. She hoped that Kessoku Band wouldn't go through something similar.

"It was all so sudden and... **sigh**, I don't want the same to happen to my Ikuyo." Kita's mother said. "I don't want her to experience what I went through."

Hitori kept silent. She understood Kita's mother's concern. But did that mean she had to let Kita's mother cut Kita from the band?

No.

“Umm, m-ma’am Kita?” Hitori spoke up.

“Yes, Gotoh-san?” Kita’s mother turned to Hitori.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Nijicat began to purr, and just in time. Hitori’s heart rate steadied as she took a sip. Then, she began her spiel.

“As Kita-chan’s t-teacher, I can confidently say that she’s getting better quite q-quick. Even faster than when I started out. I think she c-can surpass me if she keeps her pace in a year’s time. You can tell, m-ma’am Kita.”

“Go on.” Kita’s mother insisted.

“I understand your c-concern for Kita-chan. Out of all of us...” Hitori looked back to the living room. “... she’s the least experienced. Our drummer has b-been placing the drums ever since she was young, and has experience with live houses and h-how the music industry works. She’s our capable leader. A-and, our bassist has tons of musical knowledge! She composes all of our songs and is super d-dedicated to her work.”

Hitori squirmed in her seat. She was hesitant to talk about herself, lead guitarist who couldn’t even-

Don’t listen to them. Be honest. For Kita-chan.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

“I have almost four years of g-guitar experience, enough to teach Kita-chan all that sh-she knows. I also write the lyrics for our songs and help our b-bassist with the music creation process. So, y-yeah. I understand your concern.”

Hitori took a sip, suppressing a gag from how cold it became. Her fault.

“But please, ma’am Kita. Have some faith in us. Faith in Kita-chan. Since our f-formation, we’ve pushed through every challenge that life’s thrown o-our way. Y-yes, you weren’t there to s-see any of that, but still! We’re more than capable as a band... all of us. It’s what makes us Kessoku Band, p-pun intended.”

Kita’s mother giggled, then remained silent to let Hitori continue.

“And e-even if Kita-chan is the weak link out of all of u-us, she's catching up pretty q-quick. Too quick actually... a-anyways! I agree with you ma’am, I am worried f-for our future. I worry t-too much, b-b-but! I have confidence in my bandmates that we will m-make our future bright!”

Hitori shot out of her seat to pump her fist in the air, startling Nijicat from its slumber as it begrudgingly waddled back to the living room.

No Hitori, too far! Now she'll think you're cringe and an ultra weirdo, and she'll want to keep Kita-chan away from you, and then the band will-

Her thoughts were cut by Kita’s mother’s laughter.

“Honestly, you have a funny way of expressing yourself, Gotoh-san.” Kita’s mother simmered down. “Not saying that’s a bad thing. You’re unique. I like it.”

“Aww, sh-shucks... ehehehehe... hehehehe...” Hitori spouted out, her weakness to praise rearing its head yet again.

“And... I don’t doubt your words. Not with an attitude like that.” Kita’s mother hummed. “I can see you all are committed to your band.”

Hitori somehow broke through her ‘praise spiral’ to listen to Kita’s mother.

“I’ve heard some of your songs, thanks to Ikuyo. They’re pretty good.”

“Y-y-you should come watch us l-live someday! Pl-please...” Hitori offered.

“Haha, well. That’s an offer I can’t turn down. When I am free, though. I’ll bring my husband too. No promises though, he’s usually busy on Ikuyo’s school days.”

“G-good to hear...”

Kita’s mother sighed.

“Maybe I am a bit too hard on Ikuyo.” Kita’s mother paused. “I... still have my worries. And, I would have liked to meet your other band members. But... she can stay in Kessoku Band.”

“R-really?!?” Hitori shouted, before mumbling, “R-really...?”

“Yes, really. Maybe as her mother, I should let her pursue her passion. Give her the support she needs to flourish in your band.”

Another sip.

“I’m happy to see her dedication, reminds me of my younger self. Actually, Gotoh-san, you also remind me of my younger self.”

“Wh-what?”

“Whenever I argued with my dad while I was a novelist. He was so stubborn. Heh, maybe that’s where I get my stubbornness from.” Kita’s mother reminisced. “I trust you and your band to take good care of my daughter.”

“Y-yes, of course!”

“And... you better take her to greater heights, ok Gotoh-san?”

“Y-yes ma’am!”

Kita’s mother snickered. “You’re too tense Gotoh-san. Thank you for this talk. Go tell my daughter the news.”

Hitori nodded, hopping off her seat to walk to the living room.

“One more thing, Gotoh-san.” Kita’s mother stopped Hitori in her tracks.

“Y-yes ma’am?” Hitori craned her neck back to Kita’s mother.

“Can you tell Ikuyo to not neglect her studies? She’ll listen to you more than me.”

“Y-you can count on me, ma’am Kita! I won’t let you down!” Hitori did a salute, realised how goofy she looked, then zipped out of the dining room.

Kita’s mother only sipped her tea.

What a peculiar girl.

“Oh, you’re such a treat to listen to this old lady’s stories.” Kita’s grandma concluded.

“Nonsense, Grandma! I love your stories!” Kita happily beamed. “Seems so much has happened in your life.”

“And now, I get to reflect and think about all of that. Retirement is the best, haha.”

“U-um, Kita-chan?” Hitori popped in the living room. “We’re d-done.”

“Oh, hi Hitori-chan! You should’ve been here, Grandma was just recounting-” Kita stopped herself. “H-how’d it go?”

Hitori opted to nod her head, which made Kita smile.

"I knew you could do it, Hitori-chan." Kita said.

"My, isn't it getting late Gotoh-san?" Kita's grandma pointed out, looking out of the window to see the sun set. "Ikuyo here says you live quite far away."

"And we wouldn't want to keep you away for too long, now." Kita's mother reappeared behind Hitori, almost scaring the poor girl to death. Or turning into something that isn't human.

"Mooooom, don't scare Hitori-chan like that!" Kita pouted. "She doesn't like sudden surprises."

"K-Kita-chan..." Hitori whimpered.

"Oh, sorry. But really, you better be off. Ikuyo, take Gotoh-san to the train station." Kita's mother instructed.

"Ok Mom!"

"Wait. Gotoh-san, come here please." Kita's grandma ushered the pinkhead towards her. "It'll be real quick. Promise."

"U-umm, o-ok..." Hitori shuffled towards Kita's grandma.

Kita and her mother watched as the two talked to each other, noting how Hitori was slowly drifting away - both in conversation and physically.

"Hey, Ikuyo?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm... sorry for being so hard on you. I'm just worried for you." Kita's mother apologised. "I should be more supportive of your endeavours."

"Aww, Mom..." Kita gave her mother a big hug. "I know you're looking after me. Sorry for all the times I yelled at you."

They stayed hugging each other for a while, grateful that their disputes were over.

“I’m glad you see how I see the band, Mom. Even if it’s a little bit.” Kita broke the hug and smirked. “How cool was Hitori-chan?”

“Honestly, I didn’t expect her to come here at all.” Kita’s mother admitted.

“Mom!”

“I’m kidding. She’s really bold when she wants to be. She should have more confidence in herself.”

“That’s why I’m here!”

“Yeah, you bundle of joy.” Kita’s mother ruffled Kita’s hair. “Alright, you two should go now. Don’t keep her out for too long.”

“Mooom...” Kita groaned.

Kita’s mother felt something grazing her leg. She looked down to see Nijicat rubbing itself on her leg. She bent down to pick the furball up, surprised to see the cat so relaxed. This cat must be taken care of very well.

“Oh, and here.” Kita’s mother handed Kita Nijicat. “Tell Gotoh-san that she takes good care of her cat. Pretty cute too.”

“Meow!”

“It’s actually not hers, but our bassist’s. Yamada Ryo. And yes, she does take good care of Nijicat!” Kita took the feline into her arms. “I’ll tell her that though.”

Kita waited patiently for Hitori and her grandma to finish talking. When Hitori walked over, she looked like she saw a ghost.

“A-are you alright, Hitori-chan?” Kita asked, opening the front door.
“Grandma isn’t a ghost yet~”

“Y-yeah. Good. I th-think.” Hitori stuttered. “... is i-it weird that y-your grandmother gave m-me her b-b-blessing...”

“Umm, no I don’t-” Kita froze for a second, unfreezing to dash back into her house to yell, “Grandma, we aren’t dating!” Poor Nijicat got dropped into Hitori’s arms.

“Ikuyo. No yelling at your grandma- wait, you both are dating?”

“Ughhhhhh!”

All the while, Hitori became the Kitas new doormat.

The two guitarists strolled down the streets of the suburbs, the orange glow just reaching their faces. They let Nijicat go back to its stroll around the streets. They both knew Nijicat would somehow appear with Ryo the next day. Kita was currently stroking Hitori’s back, who was still recovering from the misunderstanding.

“Sorry again for my family.” Kita apologised. “They know I like girls, so they’re always like that whenever I bring a friend over. Doesn’t help that I’m pretty open when it comes to m-my... crushes...”

“I-it’s ok, Kita-chan...” Hitori breathed out. “It’s nice th-that you are o-open with them.”

Kita smiled, though it wavered when she saw Hitori’s downcast face.

“What’s wrong, Hitori-chan?” Kita asked. “You did convince my mom, right?”

“Y-yeah. I did. Just...” Hitori sighed. “I’m starting t-to feel like I didn’t do t-the right thing.”

Hitori glanced at Kita, who had a face of confusion.

“S-sorry! I meant my, u-umm... y’know... r-r-rejection...”

Kita’s confusion faded, replaced by a face of curiosity. She stayed silent to let Hitori speak.

“Is it w-weird that I feel bad? I m-m-mean, it k-kind of looks like we are d-dating... I-I think, anyways! I just... don’t w-want to disappoint, is all.”

“Hitori-chan.” Kita huffed. “You’re not disappointing anyone. It was just an honest misunderstanding. And like I said before, I don’t mind us staying as friends.”

“Th-thanks, Kita-chan.”

“Besides, you were being super honest and bold that night! As well as today!” Kita gave Hitori some headpats.

“Ehehehehe, a-anything for my guitar s-sister...” Hitori revelled in Kita’s praise, before suddenly saying, “We s-should probably find a different name.”

“Huh? But why? What’s wrong with guitar sisters?” Kita asked.

“I d-dunno. It sounds... c-cringe...”

“Hmmmmm... to other people, yeah. But how I see it, it means so much more between us. It’s our bond, held together by guitar and our friendship.”

Hitori cracked a snicker.

“W-what? I was being genuine!” Kita said.

“S-sorry, sorry...” Hitori giggled. “It just th-that, that s-sounded so cringe... hehehe...”

“Hey! So when I’m honest, it’s funny. But when you’re honest, it’s cool!” Kita playfully punched Hitori. The barrage continued as Kita’s

pout grew; though, her thoughts were somewhere else.

I'm glad Hitori-chan's becoming more comfortable around us. Around me. Heh.

"Kita-chan... I have to go home..." Hitori protested.

"Nope! You deserve allll of these punches! Hyaaaaa!" Kita unleashed her fury, continuing to punch Hitori really softly.

"O-ok..."

Hitori thought for a moment amidst Kita's punches. Wasn't she supposed to tell Kita something?

...

Oh, right.

"Umm, Kita-chan?" Hitori spoke up.

"I'm not finished with you yet!" Kita kept punching.

Hitori awkwardly waited for Kita to run out of steam, as her punches became more sluggish. Eventually, the redhead gave up.

"You are one tough girl. Phew!" Kita huffed. "I barely did anything to you!"

"Y-yeah... anyways." Hitori brushed the part of her tracksuit that Kita barely made a dent in. Actually, it looked like she somehow ironed that little part with her fists. Was it possible to-

Not now, Hitori!

Mentally slapping herself, she said, "Y-your mom said that y-you haven't, umm, been focused on y-your... st-studies..."

Kita's giddy vibes soured to a more serious tone.

“Oh. She told you?” Kita asked.

“Mhmm. W-was I not supposed to k-know? Because I can t-turn the other way and ignore it! If y-you want me to! It’s like I’ve never k-known-”

“Hitori-chan, no. It’s ok.” Kita lightly shook Hitori out of her delusions. “Really, it is.”

Kita sighed. “Guess I have been forgetting my studies just a little bit.”

“W-why, Kita-chan?” Hitori asked, though she knew the answer to that question.

She reminds me of myself.

Hitori wasn’t sure if she was happy with that thought or not.

“It’s kinda obvious, Hitori-chan.” Kita smiled, making a ‘guitar strumming’ gesture.

“Y-yeah.”

The two stayed silent for a while as they continued to walk to the train station. Nightfall has come, as the nightly breeze blew through the suburbs.

“Kita-chan.” Hitori said, jolting Kita to look at Hitori.

“Mmm?”

“I’m...” Hitori breathed in, and breathed out. “... happy. To see y-you practising even more. You’re getting b-better. B-but, as y-your friend, it’s worrying to h-hear you forget about y-your other duties. EventhoughIalsothinkstudyingiskindofboringandit’snotlikeI’mgoingtogoto-”

Hitori shook her head. Now’s not the time to spiral about her future.

“S-sorry. But b-b-back to what I was saying. Please, don’t f-forgo your studies. Not b-because I think you have a b-better shot at school th-than me, but because-ah, ok, maybe you do have a better shot, b-b-but! Because y-you have a bright future ahead of you. A-and it would be a shame for y-you to kind of th-throw that away. N-not that you don’t have a future with u-us!”

Hitori glanced at Kita.

“I get your passion for the g-guitar. You’re starting to remind m-me of myself back then. And, I k-know all you want to do is practise g-guitar to get to my level... but, pl-please not at the expense of y-your other activities.”

Hitori rubbed the back of her head.

“I g-guess I’m saying this to myself too. I know how e-easy it is to lose yourself in the music. S-s-so, let’s do our best to k-keep up with our st-studies?” Hitori offered her hand for a handshake, which started to tremble after realising how awkward the gesture was.

She didn’t need to worry about that as Kita tackled her into a hug.

“... you really can say the coolest stuff when you want to, Hitori-chan.” Kita mumbled.

“Heh, m-maybe.” Hitori reciprocated the hug.

They stayed that way for a while, enjoying each other’s company.

“Alright.” Kita broke the hug. “I’ll try. Sorry for overdoing the practice.”

“Y-you should apologise to your m-mom. She’s more worried over y-you.” Hitori advised.

“I will!”

Hitori smiled. “But r-really, you’re getting better. Y-you can afford to sl-slow down a little.”

“Afraid I’ll catch up?”

“Wh-wha! N-n-n-no! That’s not wh-what I had-”

“I can’t blame you if you feel threatened. Maybe don’t teach me too well next time.”

“Kita-chan!”

Kita stretched in her chair. It was only a couple of minutes before they’d be dismissed. She massaged her temples, remembering the given assignment. Her thoughts drifted to what Hitori said to her last night.

No more slacking off my studies! As much as I want to improve in guitar, I also have my responsibilities! E-even if I don’t like doing them as much...

Ever since she really got into playing the guitar, her interest in anything but it waned, especially when it came to her studies. She felt like she could use all of her time studying into getting better at guitar. It’s not like she would come to use any of what she was studying about in the future. When would she need to use Maths in Kessoku Band?

But, even if she felt that way, she couldn’t forget her studies. Sure, she was super confident that the band was her future. That didn’t mean that she should jump ship completely, and now that she thought about it, having something to fall back on in case things don’t go right is nice. She should really listen to her mother sometimes.

Kita was so lost in thought that she didn’t notice Hitori standing in front of her desk. It took Hitori poking Kita’s forehead for her to realise.

“I’m here!” Kita yelped. “O-oh, hi Hitori-chan!”

“L-let’s go?” Hitori offered.

“Yup! Let’s go!”

The two walked their familiar route through the school, talking about their upcoming performance that evening. Kessoku Band was performing today in Starry, and everyone was a little more hyped than usual. Kita’s mother would be amongst the audience, meaning that they had to try their best to impress her.

Kita checked her phone, scrolling past the band’s group chat.

“success! thanks @GotoHito for the help!”

“So I assume it went well, Kita-chan?”

“yup! all thanks to our Hitori-chan!”

“sick”

‘A picture of Ryo giving her thumbs up, with Nijicat in her arms.’

“What kind of response is that Ryo?”

“how is nijicat there? it was just with us at my house!”

“dunno. think my cat has teleportation powers”

“prove it, Ryo-chan.”

“my cat’s now in the kitchen”

‘A picture of Nijicat in Ryo’s kitchen.’

“It’s obvious you brought Nijicat there, Ryo.”

“what, no. now my cat’s in Bocchi’s house”

“you’re joking.”

“Yes, it is here.”

‘A picture of Hitori in her bedroom. It’s clear that Ryo edited the picture, with a crudely edited-in Nijicat in the corner.’

“woah, Nijicat really is there!”

“Don’t fall for her tricks, Kita-chan!”

Kita scrolled through a bit more of their shenanigans.

“@everyone before you guys go to bed, remember we have our performance at Starry tomorrow! Get some rest, you guys!”

“let’s slay”

“Ryo, no.”

“my mom wants to watch, is that fine? my dad wanted to join, but he’s busy with work tomorrow :(”

“Oh, yes! That just means we’ll have to work even harder to impress her!”

“regardless, were gonna blow her away, especially with my bass skills”

“*we’re.”

“ok miss killjoy”

“I wish I was there to strangle you.”

“We can do this guys! Please don’t strangle Ryo-chan!”

“Yup! Sleep well everyone!”

“goodnight guys!”

“night”

“N-nervous?” Hitori timidly asked.

“Yeah. I’m always a bit nervous before every performance we do.”
Kita pocketed her phone. “So many things can go wrong.”

Hitori hummed. She decided to keep quiet of how sometimes, she takes note of the nearest exits in Starry - in case the worst case scenario happens.

“But, with you guys, I’m sure we’ll knock it out of the park! Like we usually do.” Kita confidently stated.

Hitori nodded in agreement. Even though her heart was pushing past normal rates for a human being as she tried to keep her usual thought mush to their performances at bay, she knew that Kessoku Band could do it. Her bandmates got her back, and she has to make sure she has theirs.

“Is that...” Kita squinted her eyes as they approached the school’s gates. “M-Mom?”

“Hey Ikuyo! Gotoh-san!” Kita’s mother greeted as she gave her daughter a quick hug.

“Why are you here? Our performance doesn’t start until later tonight.”

“I, uhh, might’ve gotten a bit too excited. Don’t worry, your mother isn’t slacking off her work. I’m excused for the rest of the day, seeing as how much work I’ve done. It just means I get to see what work you do in the livehouse... correct?”

“Yup yup! It’s nothing much though, so don’t get your hopes up Mom.”

“It definitely beats going to an office and typing away your work hours.”

“U-umm.” Hitori butted in.

“Ah, right. Sorry Gotoh-san. Let’s get going?” Kita’s mother asked.
“Lead the way, Ikuyo.”

“Right! Let’s go!”

And so, the unlikely trio marched onwards to Starry. Well, it felt unlikely to Hitori as Kita and her mother talked about a bunch of things. Even if she wanted to join their conversation (big if), she didn’t know how to. They kept on bringing up topic after topic, conversation after another. She felt dizzy trying to keep up with the two, so she decided to tune out their voices until they arrived.

It made sense; Kita must’ve gotten her energy from somewhere.

“You’re sure those guitars of yours don’t weigh you both down too much?” Kita’s mother asked. “They seem pretty heavy.”

“Ehh, you do get used to it.” Kita waved off, her body swaying to the familiar rhythm of having a guitar on your back. “Right, Hitori-chan?”

“A-wh-whaugh! Y-yep! Yeah! Totally! Yes!” Hitori rapidly fired off.

“You... weren’t listening, huh.”

“I-I-I was!”

Kita’s mother snickered. “Though I do have to say Gotoh-san, you have terrible back posture.”

“Mom!”

“R-r-really?” Hitori scrambled her hands to touch her back, and attempted to straighten her back as much as her body could. “M-maybe I do...”

“You should really straighten that while you still can, Gotoh-san. Bad back posture will surely ruin your guitar playing in the long run.” Kita’s mother advised.

“... um, o-ok. Thanks, ma’am Kita.” Hitori muttered.

Kita yanked her mother to the side, then whispered something in her ear. Hitori couldn’t tell what she said, but it must’ve been embarrassing as Kita’s mother lightly blushed as Kita whispered.

Kita’s mother cleared her throat as she said, “Right, s-sorry Gotoh-san. I didn’t know y-you had, umm, well... y’know...”

“Ugh, nevermind Mom! We’re near Starry anyways, let’s go!” Kita groaned, pulling along her mother, who was still blushing.

Hitori stood for a while, before waddling over to the Kitas to catch up.

Just what did Kita-chan say to her mom?

Ryo sighed as she slumped further into her chair, as if she was trying to become an amalgamation of metal and human. Sort of like a cyborg. Except way cooler, since it was Ryo.

Hasn’t she been in this scenario before?

She’s been sent to reception once again; most probably from her recent comment on how she’s an expert in making reception fun, or something along the lines of that. Kita and Hitori haven’t arrived yet, and with Nijicat out strolling in the streets Ryo truly had nothing better to do. Nijika and her sister kept talking about how there might be some early birds, especially with how big Kessoku Band was slowly becoming around Shimokitazawa.

Oh, how foolish Ryo was to listen to them. Actually, Ryo is usually foolish, but she preferred not to think about it.

So, there she sat. Again. Waiting for anything remotely interesting to happen as the rest prepared Starry. At least she wasn't 'working' working, and with nobody near to pester her, maybe she could sneak in a little nap-

The door swung open, as Ryo revitalised her body to greet the incoming customers. She changed her pose to something cool once she saw a familiar pink tracksuit and... a pair of redheads?

"Hey Bocchi. Kita. And..." Ryo tilted her head. "... Kita's brother?"

"Her mother can have short hair if she wants, mind you." Kita's mother retorted.

"Really Ryo-chan? I don't even have siblings." Kita deadpanned.

"You must be Yamada Ryo. Nice to meet you, Yamada-san."

"I am terribly sorry for this misunderstanding. Here, let me call my friend to see if she can make it up to-"

Nijika appeared right behind Ryo, chopping her on the head. "Not in front of Kita-chan's mom. Sorry for Ryo here, welcome to Starry!"

"Thank you, Ijichi-san? I assume you are Nijika Ijichi?" Kita's mother asked.

"Yup! You came, ahaha, quite early actually. We don't start our performance until later tonight. Did Kita-chan not... tell you?"

"Oh, she did. I was just excited is all. You don't mind me watching you all work?"

"Not at all! Please, do come in!"

While Nijika ushered Kita and her mother into the livehouse (giving a glare at Ryo), Hitori popped in beside Ryo.

“Now I know why Kita has no-”

Hitori covered Ryo’s mouth before she could finish that sentence.

“Th-that’s not very nice, Ryo-chan.” Hitori said.

“What? Just an observation.” Ryo protested.

MEANWHILE...

“And... this is the bar! You can get your drinks here when you get a drink ticket at the reception, which is right by the entrance.” Nijika did a mini-tour of Starry.

“Impressive. Didn’t think an underground area could have this much space.” Kita’s mother nodded.

“Right? It seems way smaller at first glance!” Kita agreed.

“And heeeeeere’s... the manager of this place. My sister!” Nijika slipped beside Seika, who flinched at the sudden appearance of her sister.

“Niji, please. I’m young, but I still can get-oh. Hi there.” Seika greeted Kita’s mother. “Is it... Kita-san’s mother?”

“Yes, glad to meet you.” Kita’s mother shook Seika’s hand. “I’m amazed at how well this place is.”

“Thank you. It took a while to get this place exactly as it is now, but it was worth it.”

“Oh, a newbie?” PA-san leaned over from her seat. “Hi there~”

“She’s the sound engineer of this place.” Seika introduced. “A bit of a snarky one too.”

"I heard that~"

"Let the adults talk for a while, Kita-chan." Nijika beckoned over Kita.
"We've got work to do!"

"On it, Nijika-chan!"

...

"You just want your sister to suffer, huh?"

"She doesn't talk to many people, okay? I want her to be able to socialise!"

Dolphin Ryo. Dolphin Ryo.

Kita's mother do be supportive now. Ikuyoooooooooooo.

I missed the opportunity of making Kita's grandma say, "Back in my day..." and I kinda regret it. Oh well. Also, must be nice to be Nijicat. Comes in, does pretty much nothing but be a cat and everyone loves it. Must be nice being a cat. I want to be a cat. Meow meow.

What's with me finishing full blown, long chapters while I have exams in the same week? Crazy.

There's more to this chapter btw. Not a part two, but more of a B-sidestory. Hope to get that out soon. Maybe.

Chapter 11: B Side will come our whenever it does!

Chapter 11: B Side

Chapter 24: Chapter 11: B Side

Meanwhile...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The aroma of sautéed onions filled the Ijichi household, as Nijika finished up preparing some onions for their dish for dinner. She added some vegetables to her pan, stir-frying them along with the onions. She then slipped in a few chunks of tofu, mixing them all together with a little bit of soy sauce. She wasn't following a strict recipe, rather experimenting with her cooking. She made sure that what she was making was going to be edible, unlike a certain sister who cannot make anything edible without instructions.

Nijika could just imagine how great it was going to taste. The sweetness of the onions, the sour tangy yet flavourful taste of the soy sauce, all with a hint of salt and pepper.

Hmm, actually. We could make do without the salt. Soy sauce is pretty salty as it is.

Nijika sprinkled some pepper into her pan. She had to resist watering at the mouth as she lowered the stove's flame.

"Nijika, is the food done?" Ryo lightly slapped on the table. "I'm hungry and ready. I'm heady."

Nijika twitched. She also had to resist the urge to chuck the pan straight to Ryo's face.

"Almost done." Nijika spoke over the sizzling. "Can't you be patient, Ryo? Good food takes time."

“Say that to fast food places. And family restaurants. And vending machines. And-”

“Ok, I get it! Geez, for someone who’s getting free food, you complain too much!”

“Love you too, Nijika.”

“That’s not gonna work!”

“Niji, stop yelling.” Seika popped her head from the couch. “I know she’s annoying, and scummy, and honestly kind of a leech, and...”

“Manager, I’m right here y’know.”

“... sometimes doesn’t do her job. At all. But use your inside voice, please.”

“Alright, fine.” Nijika turned off the stove, turning to Ryo as she stared her down. “Remind me why you’re here.”

“For a free...” Ryo trailed off when she saw Nijika’s eyes glimmer. “... I-uhh, mean. I’m here to hang out with a friend.”

Nijika responded with a raised eyebrow.

“Okay, I was getting lonely without Nijicat while roaming the streets. And you happen to cook really well. Happy?”

“Aww. You’re nicer when you’re honest. Love you too, Ryo.” Nijika turned back to her dish.

“Y-yeah, I am. Yes. Uh huh.” Ryo stammered, which made Nijika giggle. “Honesty is the best policy, yep.”

“It’s great that today’s a public holiday.” Seika walked over to prepare the table. “It was nice spending the whole day here.”

“And, with all that free time, you could’ve taken care of your plants, Manager~” PA-san piped up, who was currently watering said plants. “There, there. Mama will take care of you.”

“Y-yeah...”

“Is that the only reason why she’s here?” Nijika whispered to Seika. “I mean, I don’t mind PA-san being here. It’s nice she’s spending time with us. Kinda. It’s just...”

“Leave her be, Niji. She’s not harming anyone.” Seika said.

“Shhh~” PA-san stroked the plant’s leaves. “You’re ok now.”

“I’ve seen weirder. Unfortunately. No offence, Ryo.”

“None taken.” Ryo bowed. “I’m actually flattered and honoured that you said that.”

“Riiight.”

“Ok, but...” Nijika waved her spatula at the couch. “What’s Hiroi-san doing here?”

Seika looked to where Nijika was pointing, seeing the magenta-haired bassist sprawled onto their couch.

“Well, she kind of barged in, took a shower and then passed out right there.” Seika explained. “There’s nothing I could’ve done.”

“You could’ve at least tried, Sis.”

“Like I said. Nothing I could’ve done.”

Nijika sighed. For as much as both of them hated bassists, they sure do tolerate them too much.

“Don’t worry Niji. She’ll be out of our hair before you know it.”

Nijika looked over to the slumbering drunkard, who was snoring loudly on the couch.

I honestly don't see what Ryo, Sis, or Bocchi-chan see in her.

“Anyways, might wanna wake her up. Food’s about to be ready.” Nijika placed the sautéed vegetables onto a plate. “It’s experimental, so don’t be surprised if it doesn’t taste like my normal cooking.”

“Ohh. Exciting.” Seika placed the last plate on the dining table. She gave a disappointed look at the bassist already there.

“If it makes you feel any better, I do feel bad, Manager.” Ryo admitted.

“I’d feel better if you had helped. Or fell onto the floor. Laughter’s the best medicine.”

“D-don’t remind me...” Ryo averted her gaze. “Brings up... bad memories.”

“If you’re worried about bugs, Ryo, don’t be.” Nijika placed the food onto the table. “I haven’t seen a cockroach in weeks.”

“Th-that must mean they’re planning. Scheming. They could b-be anywhere...”

“Actually, I think these plants are natural bug repellent.” PA-san slipped into the dinning room. “Not sure though, there’s only certain plants that do that. And, I didn’t really check what kind of plants they are when I bought them. It means that you two sisters better take care of these plants, because that’s pretty nice if they really do scare away any bugs.”

Everyone looked at PA-san for a moment.

“Oh, sorry? Are we going to have dinner? I just assumed that, since you’re preparing more than two plates and-I’ll just, umm, go now.”

“Y-yeah, PA-san! Please, eat with us! I, ehhehe, already assumed that you were going to eat with us, hence the large amount of food.” Nijika scratched her cheek. “We’re more amazed at your, umm, plant knowledge.”

“Well, of course! I am the resident crazy plant lady after all~” PA-san cheekily said as she took her seat. “I’ll happily tell you all I know about plants!”

“Aheheheh, heheh, yeah...” Nijika awkwardly laughed. PA-san being super into plants is one thing, but the fact that she was self-aware was another. “Sure...”

“I’ll go get Hiroi.” Seika grumbled, getting off her seat to walk to the living room.

Some sounds of protesting and a little yelp later, Seika dragged a sleepy and somehow still drunk Hiroi to the dining table. By the ear.

“Kikuri Hiroi is here! Oww, oww...” Hiroi announced, swatting Seika’s grip on her ear. “You coulda woke me up a bit more gracefully. I was enjoying a nice nap on your couch!”

“Keep that up and you won’t be eating with us.” Seika stated.

“Wha-oh! Little Seika! Good job on the food, this all looks delicious!”

“It’s Nijika, Hiroi-san. And thank you.” Nijika corrected. “I am experimenting, so please don’t-”

“No meat? Daaaaang, didn’t think you two would be vegetarians. I mean, not saying that-ow, ow, ow!” Hiroi yelped as her ear got tugged again.

“Sit. Before I regret ever letting you in here.” Seika grunted, letting go of Hiroi’s ear for her to whimper into her seat.

“Thanks Sis.” Nijika added.

“You’re supposed to be welcoming to your guests, not scaring them off...” Hiroi muttered.

“I was wondering the same thing, Hiroi-san.” Ryo whispered into Hiroi’s ear. “It’s a little weird, but I think they ran out of meat.”

“I’m not complaining, but,” PA-san leaned over to whisper. “I am with Ryo-chan here.”

Nijika loudly cleared her throat.

“Let’s just be **THANKFUL** and eat some **GOOD FOOD** . Yeah?”
Nijika sweetly said.

“O-ok.” / “Y-yep!” / “Sounds g-good.”

All three of the Ijichis’ guests agreed in unison.

I feel like I’m at work again...

Little Seika really is like Seika...

Nijika definitely takes from her sister...

After an awkward second of silence, the five began to eat - right after Ryo began to wolf down on nearly half of the vegetables, which Nijika had to remind the bassist to share.

“Mmm, mmm! Thish stassh is goo! Nicsh on, Little Seika!” Hiroi said.

“Ugh, speak when your mouth isn’t full, Hiroi.” Seika nudged Hiroi.
“You’re a grown adult, be a good... well, a better -no. Subpar role model. Yeah.”

“I am a good role model. Why, I have two kohais!”

“I meant outside of music.”

“Oh. Well, they have you for that.”

“W-well. Yeah! B-but!” Seika blushed. “Oh, shut it you!”

“Haaah, I’m right, aren’t I?”

“But being real, these vegetables are immaculate, Nijika-chan.” PA-san sighed. “If I only knew how to cook.”

“From that statement... what do you usually eat, PA-san?” Nijika asked, taking a broccoli Ryo was sneakily taking for herself.

“Hey.”

“Umm, well... it’s usually whatever I have in my fridge~”

“And, that is?” Nijika also took some rice from Ryo’s plate, shooting a smirk at the bassist as she did so.

“Hey.”

“I think it’s better if you didn’t know~”

“Yeah, for both of us.”

“Say, Little Seika?” Hiroi asked.

“It’s Nijika.” Nijika again corrected.

“Why do you have your phone on the table? I mean, I know I’m currently downing my, uhh... fifth? Sixth? Somewhere along those lines amount of alcohol.” Hiroi took another gulp from her sake box. “Ahh~”

“You really drink wherever, huh.”

“Yup! Anyways, I may be a drunkard, but even I have table manners.”

Hiroi then let out a loud belch.

“Excuse me! See?”

“Yeah, really respectful.”

“I think it is, Hiroi-san.” Ryo interjected.

“Shut it Ryo. You barely have any table manners.” Nijika shot.

“And you have no manners for me, meanie.”

“Don’t turn the tables on me, now!”

“See? You’re not using your inside voice, Nijika. Manager’s going to get mad.”

“Argh!”

Hiroi nudged Seika. “Those two are cute, you should-”

“Adopt Ryo? In no Earth am I doing that, Hiroi.” Seika finished Hiroi’s sentence. She started blushing again when Hiroi gave her a smirk.

“That’s... not w-what you were going to say, huh.”

“Yep!” Hiroi smiled.

“Hehe, Manager~” PA-san poked. “I might mistake you for a tomato if you keep blushing like that. And I looooooove tomatoes!”

“Eww, gross! Ugh! Workplace harassment!” Seika buried her face into the table.

“So your own home counts as the workplace? No wonder you’re so stressed, Manager.”

“Stop it!”

“Ok, but for real Nijika-san.” Hiroi went back to Nijika, who was armlocking Ryo. “Are you expecting someone to call you or...?”

“Oh.” Nijika let go of Ryo, who started gasping for air. “Ryo, I wasn’t holding you that hard.”

“Hey, it adds style points.” Ryo rationalised.

“Yeah, heaving and gasping for air is really cool. Plus points. Your parents would be proud.”

“Thank you, Nijika. Such high praise.”

Nijika shook her head. “Oh, Ryo. Anyways, Hiroi-san. You were asking about my phone?”

Hiroi nodded.

“Well... it’s about Bocchi-chan.”

Hiroi’s eyes revealed themselves to Nijika.

“I’m listenin’.”

Nijika blinked.

How does she see with her eyes closed? I actually never really thought about it, huh. Weird.

“Y-yeah, Bocchi-chan. She was going to visit Kita-chan’s home today to talk with her parents about Kessoku Band. To convince them about Kita-chan’s involvement with us.”

“Isn’t that a little heavy for her?” Hiroi asked.

“Nah. She’s got Nijicat.” Ryo gave her signature thumbs up.

“Ni... ji... who?”

“Oh right. It’s my new cat. I can show you it when you come by Starry. Pretty cool kitty.”

“I... uhh, don’t think a cat will help that much with something like what Bocchi-chan’s gonna do.”

“Trust me, Hiroi-san. That cat is magical.”

“And it’s pretty cute!” Nijika added. “If only I wasn’t allergic to their fur...”

“Will Bocchi-chan be fine? I can swing by if-” Hiroi paused. “Ahehe, actually, that might be a bad idea. I don’t even know where Kita-san lives.”

“Good work using that brain of yours, Hiroi.” Seika knocked on Hiroi’s head. “Well, what’s left of it after you drink.”

“Owww...”

“I didn’t knock you that hard, sheesh.”

“I’m also worried for her, Hiroi-san.” Nijika sighed. “But, she really insisted on doing it by herself.”

“Hmm...” Hiroi thought. “Ok, if you say so!”

“R-really? Just like that?”

“Well, yeah! That girl is committed to you guys, way more than you guys give her credit for. It’s all that she knows and loves. She’ll fight tooth and nail to keep y’all together.”

Hiroi sipped on her sake.

“Sides, she’s Kita-san’s teacher, right? I’m sure she’ll do great. And Kita-san’s there too!”

“Yeah.” Nijika smiled. “Wait, so why did you sound so concerned th-”

“Anyways, all that talking made me hungry again. Don’t mind me taking another serving.” Hiroi took some more vegetables. “I’d take

more of this stuff over the stuff I normally eat any day of the week.”

“Amen to that, Hiroi-san.” Ryo agreed.

Nijika watched the two bassists essentially finish the rest of the vegetables. She shook her head to herself.

Hiroi-san may be a drunk, but she really does care for Bocchi-chan.

“That’s why I keep her around.” Seika said, appearing by Nijika’s side. “She’s annoying to deal with, but she really cares for those she cares about. Especially to her kohai.”

“So now you read minds?” Nijika quipped.

“Oh, I’m sorry Niji. It was rude of me to read into your mind without asking.”

“Ok, stop it you. You’re reaching Ryo levels of comedy.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? You find her funny.”

“Hmm. Point taken. By the way, you’re washing dishes tonight.”

“Again?”

“Sis, last time was last week. My hands are going to become wrinkled if I keep washing them.”

“And you don’t mind if that happens to me?”

“Mhmm! You’re old anyways.”

“A woman in her thirties isn’t old!”

“Inside voice, Sis.”

“Mmmmm...”

“Umm, may I... help with the dishes?” PA-san meekly asked. “It’s the least I could do for my intrusion.”

“Sure.” Seika nodded. “Don’t expect me to pay you extra for this though.”

PA-san snapped her fingers.

“Valiant effort though.” Seika added.

“You two could learn a thing or two from PA-san... here...” Nijika turned to see the vegetables gone, with both bassists happily sitting on their seats. “Good thing we’re all finished.”

“Urp! Sorry Nijika-san! They were too good for us to leave here. Ain’t that right, Ryo-san?” Hiroi said.

“Yep. Good meal. Thank you, Nijika.” Ryo bowed.

“Hand me your plates for Sis and PA-san to wash.” Nijika said, turning to the sink. “Which, now that I think about it, how are you going to wash... oh. I guess you can just roll up your sleeves, huh. Neat.”

“It’s like we rarely see PA-san’s hands or somethin’.” Hiroi handed Nijika her plate, almost dropping it in the process. “Hidden behind those big sleeves and all.”

“Well, I do have nice hands~” PA-san said, showing off her hands.

“You do know how to wash dishes, right?” Seika asked, dumping the dirty dishes into the sink.

“Of course~”

“I’m somehow more worried about Sis washing.” Nijika said, giving PA-san the remaining dirty plates. “She nearly broke two plates last week.”

“Not my fault plates are slippery!” Seika protested. She splashed some sink water on PA-san, who whined in response.

“Ok, yeah sure. Blame the plates.” Nijika turned to Ryo, who was still lazing on the dining table. “So, seeing as you’re not going home anytime soon...”

“What makes you say that?” Ryo said.

“Ryo, when’s the last time you left my house right after dinner?”

“Uhh... hold on... it’s on the tip of my tongue... hmmmmmm... I think-”

“Never. Exactly. Anyways, wanna Smash?”

Hiroi nearly choked on her sake upon hearing that.

“**cough, cough**, wh-what?!?”

“You said that on purpose.” Ryo rolled her eyes.

“Of course. Can’t miss a good opportunity.” Nijika fired back. “We’re just going to play some video games, Hiroi-san.”

“O-ok, **cough** . Geez, coulda worded that better.” Hiroi wiped her mouth. “Both of you aren’t even old enough for that kinda stuff.”

Ryo snickered.

“Shush you.” Nijika said. “I still have to beat you up for playing that stupid alligator.”

“Crocodile, Nijika. He’s a crocodile.” Ryo corrected, already walking to Nijika’s bedroom. “He’s also royalty too.”

“Won’t matter when I kick your butt!” Nijika shouted to Ryo. “Oh, sorry Hiroi-san. Didn’t mean to leave you alone here. Do you, uhh, want to watch us... play?”

“Nah. That video game stuff isn’t for me. Might colour your floor in green if I get dizzy watching that. I’ll just make sure your sister doesn’t drop a plate or somethin’.” Hiroi waved off.

“I’m not that clumsy-oh, whoops!” Seika yelled from the kitchen sink.

“Manager, you have to hold it more firmly.” PA-san advised. “See? It makes it easier to scrub with the sponge too.”

“So now you’re a dishwashing expert?”

“Living by yourself has some perks, Manager~”

“Alright then. Have fun with them, Hiroi-san!” Nijika waved off as she dashed to her room.

“Will do, Little Seika!” Hiroi waved back, before suddenly jolting up. “Wait! Your phone!”

“Oh, my bad!” Nijika zipped back to the living room, picking up her phone she left at the dining table. “Thanks Hiroi-san.”

“Have fun ‘smashing’. Hehe.” Hiroi joked.

“Will do!” Nijika automatically replied, which made her stop just by her bedroom door. She blushed slightly before entering.

“Night Sis. Good job not breaking any plates today.”

“Have a little more faith in your sister, Niji. Night.”

Closing her bedroom door, Nijika immediately scrambled to her bed, sinking into the mattress. She had a busy day tomorrow: school being school, a potentially busy day at Starry and ending the day off with a hopefully stellar Kessoku Band performance. Now that she thought about it, she should have waited for Hitori and Kita to settle their dispute with Kita’s family, but she was sure that both will be ready, whether Kita’s family supported her or not. At least 95% sure.

Maybe make that 80%? It felt more like 75%. Isn't that a bit too low?

Nijika grabbed her phone. Both guitarists haven't updated her or Ryo about the situation, and worry was eating her alive. She checked before she and Ryo began to play; she checked after demolishing Ryo with her new Pikachu tech; she checked after sending Ryo off and shutting down many pleas to have a sleepover; and she even checked before getting ready for bed.

Perhaps she could ask Seika to reschedule their performance to a later date, in case things don't go well with Kita's family. And even if things went well, maybe having a performance right after isn't the best idea.

What if Kita's family doesn't want Kita-chan with us?

If she was honest, she has thought about this more than once. Ever since Kita eventually opened up to her about her tensions with her family, Nijika has considered the possibility. After all, she was the band's leader, and the possibility of one of their bandmates being unable to continue playing with them was definitely something she needed to keep in mind. But despite that, Nijika kept reminding herself not to give it much thought. After all, Hitori had things under control.

She thinks. As much as she's seen the pinkhead grow and continue to show herself as Nijika's hero, she felt that she was basically thrown into the lion's den. With Kita, so maybe Hitori wouldn't be ripped to shreds.

Nijika sighed.

I'm happy that Bocchi-chan was so adamant about going, but... I guess I'll know what happens tomo-

She paused that thought when she saw her phone light up, with a message from Kita in the band's group chat. Mentioning Hitori.

Nijika opened her messaging app, smiling upon reading the message.

“She did it...” Nijika whispered, already typing a response.

All of her tension released into relief as she chatted for a bit with the band, reminding them to get some rest for their performance the next day. She then turned off her phone, sinking back into her mattress. She felt that her sleep tonight was going to be a little more sweet than usual.

I shouldn't have ever doubted my hero. Thank you, Bocchi-chan.

Quick Curry Hydro E is here. I guess this is her debut chapter, so yeah. Honestly, kinda struggled writing everyone here since it is a bit of an odd bunch (at least to me), not much to reference to. Hopefully everyone's cool with them chilling while Hitori and Kita advance the plot or something idk.

I don't think eating vegetables and tofu with rice is probably something in Japan, but whatever. I kinda wanna eat what Nijika was cooking.

Plant PA-san. Plant PA-san.

Got some side-stories (hopefully) ready soon! Just need to write them, before big chapter drop. The next big chapter (I think it's gonna be chonky) is something that I'm excited to write about. If only I had the time...

Next thingy coming out whenever!

Interlude IV

Chapter 25: Interlude IV

Ryo and Kita reenact a familiar duel.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“C’mon Nijika-chan, you can do it!” Kita shouted at her end of the street, panting slightly.

“Augh, waugh, y-yeaugh!” Nijika responded as she half-jogged, half-stumbled over to Kita.

She ended up nearly crashing into Kita, who somehow withstood the force. Kita waited for Nijika to take a breather as the poor blonde gasped for air in Kita’s arms.

“S-sorry Kita-chan... haaah...” Nijika managed to get out. “... hoo... heeh... gimme a minute...”

“Sure, I’ll take us to a nearby bench.” Kita said, supporting Nijika as they walked over to their saving grace: a public bench.

Nijika was the first one to sprawl onto the bench, still gasping for air. Kita sat next to her, also breathing heavily.

“W-was that... the whole... uwahh... c-city?” Nijika asked.

“Yeah. I think two laps around the whole of Shimokitazawa.” Kita nodded. “Phew! How are you holding up, Nijika-chan?”

“I wanna... throw up... and die... and go to bed...”

“Take your time. I’ll go get us some drinks.” Kita got up.

“... lifesaverrrr...” Nijika flopped around on the bench.

Kita mildly jogged to the nearest vending machine. She returned to the flopping blonde with two bottles, one iced tea and one lemonade.

“Here! Your favourite, right?” Kita handed the dying blonde the lemonade.

Nijika snatched it from Kita’s hands, proceeding to unceremoniously chug down half of its contents. Each gulp was somehow comically loud, almost making Kita recoil in disgust.

“Ahh~” Nijika sighed in bliss, before looking over to Kita’s scrunched face. “Y-yeah. Thanks Kita-chan. Sorry you had to see that.”

“A little bit unladylike.” Kita sipped on her iced tea.

“Hey, I just ran... like a bazillion miles. Don’t you unladylike me, Kita-chan.”

“You mean... we ran?”

“Yeah, yeah. Same shmame.”

Shmame?

Nijika stretched. “Although I know my body’s gonna ache for a week, I’m glad we did this. I’m starting to feel a little bit healthier each time we go for a run.”

She coughed. “But, do I have to feel like throwing up every time we do this?”

Kita pondered. “Well, that is a sign you are pushing your body to its limits, so yes!”

“Great...”

“By the way, those sports clothes really do match!” Kita beamed, already pulling out her phone to take a picture.

“K-Kita-chan, please. No pictures.” Nijika lowered Kita’s phone. Although she did agree that the sports leggings and the slightly oversized shirt she bought matched her well, she still was a little self-conscious about it. Especially with how tight her leggings were. She thought back to when she went shopping with her sister.

“Sis, do I have to buy the tight leggings?” Nijika asked. “I’d rather have something more, y’know, less tight.”

“Niji, it’s what all people who jog wear.” Seika replied. “I think. Dunno why you wanted me to help you with this.”

“Your my sister, Sis. I trust your judgment. And because I don’t want to go on a shopping trip with Kita-chan.”

“Fair. You do look good in those leggings though. And you’re not fat.”

“Sis!”

“What? You really aren’t.”

“Fiiiine~” Kita whined. “It’s a shame Hitori-chan and Ryo-chan don’t join us.”

“More like can’t. We’d be dealing with more problems if they did join us.” Nijika finished her lemonade, tossing it into a nearby trash can. She pumped her fist when the bottle got in. “Ryo will only move that much if it involves chasing her cat, and Bocchi-chan will definitely melt on the sidewalk. And that’s being generous with both of them.”

“Still, they should be more active in their lives! That’s key to having a healthy body!”

“Kita-chan, you’re a walking sugar cane. I don’t know how you don’t have diabetes.”

“H-hey! Now that’s unladylike!”

“Fair.”

The two sat in silence, enjoying the small period of reprieve. Before-

“Hey, don’t you and Ryo have something planned today?” Nijika asked.

“Hmm?” Kita responded, jolting upright as she said, “Oh, right! I-is it ok if I-”

“Sure. You don’t have any sleepovers planned, hmm? Specifically, with a certain… guitarist we all know and love?” Nijika butted in, smirking.

Kita glanced away, blushing. “Th-thanks Nijika-chan. And i-it was only that one time!”

“Alright, c’mon. W-woah…” Nijika hopped up, wobbling slightly. “Actually, can you lead? I might collapse any second thanks to my jelly legs.”

“Sure!” Kita tossed her iced tea into the trash can. She awkwardly walked over when it missed, dropping the empty bottle into the trash can. “You didn’t see that.”

“See what?”

Kita snickered.

“Right.” Nijika shoved her weight on Kita. “Onwards!”

“G-geez, Nijika-chan. Try pulling y-your weight!” Kita coughed. “I also jogged around the city, twice!”

“Are you saying I’m heavy?”

“When you lean on me like that, yeah!”

When Nijika and Kita arrived at Starry, after each of them took a shower and changed, they were greeted with Ryo and Hitori surprisingly busy. The guitarist was hauling the old smoke machine to the stage, while the bassist was already onstage, shifting a lone plastic chair.

“Hey guys.” Seika greeted the two newcomers. “Just in time too. Ryo was looking for you, Kita-chan.”

“Mhmm~” PA-san kept up behind Seika. “Another performance, ooooooh...”

“Oh? Well, don’t spoil it for me Kita-chan.” Nijika said. “Keep it a surprise.”

“Ah, hehe, ehehe, yeah...” Kita awkwardly laughed. “You’ll definitely like it... maybe...”

“Yo, Kita. Got your outfit ready?” Ryo hollered over to Kita, pointing to a table with a funky outfit folded neatly on it. “We’re almost done setting everything up.”

“Y-yup!” Hitori nodded, placing the smoke machine near the stage. She was brimming with excitement, already giggling to herself. “Hehe, I’m part of t-their performance, ehehehehe...”

“Woah, Bocchi-chan’s part too?” Nijika asked, sitting down on a nearby chair. “Can’t wait to see what you three came up with!”

Kita skipped over to Ryo, taking Ryo’s outfit with her. The two then headed off to change, while Hitori shuffled onstage to slowly close the stage curtains. She tried reaching up to pull down the curtains, but could just barely reach it with her fingertips.

“Uhh, Bocchi-chan! They close automatically!” Nijika yelled. “PA-san, can you please spare her the embarrassment?”

“Sure thing~” PA-san giggled, moving back to her booth to lower the curtains. “She did look cute doing that though.”

Hitori fidgeted on the spot, watching the stage curtains lower slowly. She then looked like she had forgotten to bring something, scrambling offstage to come back with her guitar and a cable. She plugged her guitar into one of the nearby amps, waving over to PA-san for a soundcheck.

strum

Perfect. Hitori waited even longer, periodically looking behind.

“Ah, hehehe, j-just wait a moment...” Hitori bowed to the audience... which consisted of Nijika. And the adults. “Our, umm, p-performers aren’t ready...”

The host twiddled her thumbs, tapped her shoes, tuned her guitar and even managed to lock eyes with Nijika twice. Yet, the performers weren’t ready.

“S-s-so, umm...” Hitori stuttered, as she felt her legs wobble. “H-how about a-airline f-f-food? Huh? Is th-that how that goes...”

Nijika was about to get up (painfully, her legs still ached) to Hitori out of pity when she heard hushed talking behind the curtains. She then witnessed the pink head be yanked behind the curtains by someone (probably Kita), where Hitori then reappeared after being basically shoved back onstage (probably Ryo).

“Hahahaha, th-they’re ready!” Hitori dejectedly laughed, pulling out her phone. “S-sorry for the delay, umm...”

Hitori cleared her throat, stared at her phone for a bit, then spoke.

“L-ladies and gentle... wait. I g-guess just ladies, hehe. Welcome t-to the... feature f-film? Feature film for today! Yay... whoo...”

Her greeting was met with supportive applause from Nijika, who then nudged her sister and PA-san to do the same. Hitori scrolled through her phone, probably to find the next set of lines to say.

Seika scrunched her brows as she leaned over to Nijika. "I hope Ryo knows we open in half an hour..." Seika whispered.

"Hmm, maybe. But I don't think anyone's complaining." Nijika said. "Anyways, it's an one-off thing. Hopefully. Our early birds wouldn't mind the entertainment."

"But it's Ryo we're talking about here."

"Mmm... true. If things go horribly bad, Ryo might work harder to compensate for being publicly humiliated." Nijika said, rubbing her hands together sinisterly.

"Keep your desires for Ryo to fail on the low, Niji. As much as I am worried about this, it might be good. Like last time."

Nijika just grumbled in response. "Might."

"A-ah, found it! W-wait, Iwasntsupposedtosaythatout-**ahem** . S-s-sorry. T-today's performance will be d-done by Yamada Ryo a-and Kita Iku-I m-mean Kita Kita! Uhh, umm, y-yeah! Oh, a-and for the music, I'll b-be playing on my guitar. W-we will be doing a little s-skit that... umm... w-well, it was mostly Ryo-chan's i-idea and I don't really k-know what it is. B-b-but! Hopefully you all w-will enjoy..."

After Hitori spoke, she shuffled offstage to the left, pulling out her guitar on standby. The audience and Hitori waited for the performance to begin.

Until PA-san got a notification on her phone. From Ryo.

"Ah, hehe~" PA-san giggled as she waddled over to her booth. "Give me a moment."

Nijika just shook her head.

Classic Ryo.

When the curtains finally went up, the stage was covered in smoke. Nijika could barely see someone sitting on the plastic chair Ryo brought onto the stage.

The stage lights revealed that it was Ryo. She had her hair combed all the way back - Nijika guessed she used hair gel to get her hair to look like that. She could make out that Ryo was wearing a long muted blue coat with similarly coloured boots. Nijika knew who Ryo was dressing up as (the plastic chair helped her realise), but she couldn't find her holding any kind of sword. If Ryo really was to go all in like this, then surely she must have the sword, which is iconic to the character.

Just then, another figure appeared on the right. Slowly, the figure appeared to be Kita, who was wearing similar clothing to Ryo. She had her hair down like a mop, forgoing her usual side-ponytail. Nijika caught a good view of her clothing: a maroon jacket that went down to her knees, a navy blue shirt and dark jeans with leather brown boots. Similar to Ryo's clothing...

Now Nijika was sure what they were parodying. She wasn't sure if she was looking forward to the performance, or preparing to cringe until next week. Maybe a little bit of both.

Kita stopped her approach to Ryo.

"Hey Ryo-chan! Your portal-opening days are over." Kita said, with an outstretched arm. "Give me the Yamada's heritage."

Ryo chuckled.

"If you want it..." Ryo got up from her plastic chair, making sure it dragged extra hard so the sound reverberated to the ends of the livehouse. "... then you'll have to take it."

Nijika finally can see what Ryo was wearing. In addition to her blue coat, she was wearing a blue vest and the same jeans as Kita was wearing. And, instead of a sword, she was holding...

Nijicat??

She instantly wore a mask, swivelling her head to see that Seika already had two on her face. Seika shot a glare at Nijika, who nodded begrudgingly in response.

Ryo's totally dead after this.

"But, I guess you already knew that." Ryo turned to Kita.

"I figured you'd say that." Kita pulled out... a toy pistol? It stood out from everything else. Even from the plastic chair.

Nijika had to suppress a cackle.

Ryo slightly shook her head. "How many times have we fought?"

Kita shrugged. "Hard to say. It's the only memory I have of us ever since we were kids."

The two smiled at each other, before Ryo started to cough from all of the smoke.

"G-give me a sec..." Ryo broke character as she tried to clear her lungs. "**cough, cough** Geez, th-this is a lot of smoke."

More coughing. "**cough, cough** Gak! Urk. W-wow, that's a lot..."

Even more coughing later, Ryo composed herself. "Ok, I'm... good. Yeah."

"Time to finish this, Ryo-chan!" Kita yelled, attempting to twirl her toy pistol. It was more like an awkward toss, where she had to pick it up from the ground after she dropped it twice; but it was a valiant attempt. "O-once and for all!"

Both girls readied their stances.

Is Kita-chan and Ryo really about to fight? I'd be impressed if they-oh. Nevermind.

Nijika watched as Ryo sent Nijicat after Kita, who began to run in circles. Meanwhile, Hitori began to shred, a little bit too hard for what was essentially a wild goose chase. Eventually, Kita collapsed on the floor, being barraged by Nijicat's licking.

"Hehehe, stop Nijicat! That tickles!" Kita protested.

All the while Ryo stood over Kita, with crossed arms and a smug look.

"Okay guys, that's enough." Nijika snickered. "We have to clean all this up. We're opening soon."

"What?" Ryo asked. She said something afterwards, but it couldn't be heard by Nijika. Or anyone.

"Oh, whoops."

Nijika walked over to Hitori, who was still shredding on her guitar. It took a minute of deliberating on what to do before Nijika decided to ask PA-san to turn off the amp.

Hitori jolted when she realised her guitar wasn't making much noise, glancing at the blonde across from her. "W-wha? Did I d-do something wrong? I'm sorry!" Hitori bowed.

"You're good, Bocchi-chan. Don't worry. Hard to speak with your shredding. Sounded really good by the way, save most of it for our band performances!" Nijika reassured.

"O-oh... hehehehe..." Hitori squirmed in place.

"Anyways, like I was saying. We have to clean up. We're opening soon."

“Aww.” Ryo sagged, picking up her plastic chair.

“Kita-chan! When you’re done playing with Nijicat, help us set the tables.”

“G-got that!” Kita said. “S-stop it, Nijicat! I need to go to work!”

“Oh, and Ryo?”

“Yeah?” Ryo said, halfway down the stage with her plastic chair.

“Manager wants a word with you.”

Nijika visibly saw the words sink into Ryo, as her yellow irises grew just slightly. Ryo craned her neck to see Seika drilling a hole into her. She gulped audibly.

“N-noted. Prep my casket in c-case things go south.” Ryo stuttered.

“Oh, it will. Nothing I can do for you now~” Nijika poked Ryo as she dashed off to help Hitori with the smoke machine.

With a heavy heart and a sort-of heavy plastic chair, Ryo shambled towards her doom.

“R-Ryo-chan! Your cat is... hehehe, staph!” Kita continued to laugh as Nijicat devoured its prey alive. With light licking and ticklish cuddling. “I c-can’t get up! Someone h-help me, hahahahah, please!”

Thankfully, Seika was more stern to Nijicat’s sudden appearance than the actual performance, which the older sister was impressed by. Even if she didn’t get what they were parodying, to which Ryo had to half-hazardly explain what *Devil May Sob 5* is.

“What’s a Vergil?” Seika had asked. Ryo struggled to keep her mouth shut from belting out with laughter. “And why the plastic chair?”

A little lecture on letting Seika know when the cat was coming to visit and a laundry list of work to do later (it was tending the bar with Nijika, but it felt like a list to Ryo), Ryo joined with the younger blonde at the bar.

“Been a while since it’s been us two here, hmm?” Nijika greeted Ryo.

“Yeah.” Ryo knelt down to scoop up Nijicat.

“Couldn’t find a casket for you. Sorry. Hope a-”

“Ain’t that right, Nijicat?”

“Meow!”

“Who’s a good actor? You are. You little furball.”

“Alright, great talk Ryo.” Nijika grumbled.

A yelp was heard coming from the entrance, making everyone glance at the source of the sound. Nijika and Ryo leaned forward to see Kita pop out from reception.

“My bad! Accidentally scared Hitori-chan awake!” Kita apologised.

“She was dozing off from her performance.”

“All good! Tell her we’re proud of her public speaking!” Nijika hollered back. “Oh, and, uhh, don’t scare her when we have customers!”

“You got it!”

Nijika sighed. “Things are never quiet around here.”

“But don’t you like that?” Ryo commented, followed up with a meow from Nijicat.

“Wouldn’t trade it for the world.” Nijika smiled.

Ryo hummed.

“Say, why haven’t you got me to do any skits with you?” Nijika asked.
“My acting isn’t that bad.”

“It is.”

“Hey!”

“And, well...” Ryo trailed off.

“Well?”

“My, umm, ideas for us are kind of... well, too goofy. At least with Kita, even though they are somewhat goofy, they’re competent. Or something like that.”

Nijika raised her eyebrow.

“Promise you won’t hate me?” Ryo muttered.

“Ryo, I’ve dealt with your shenanigans since the dawn of time. At this point, I don’t know how to hate you.” Nijika said.

Ryo perked up.

“... I don’t mean that literally. But you get the idea.”

Ryo sagged, but kept her poker face.

“Right. So, uhh...” Ryo rattled her brain. “My top idea was for me to dress up like a rapper.”

“O... kay.” Nijika nodded slowly.

“And you’d dress up as a banana.”

“There it is.”

“Wait, hear me out. Then, you’d do a dance like this...” Ryo mimicked bobbing left and right. “... while I said, erm, ‘It’s peanut

butter jelly time!' over and over again."

Nijika faceplanted onto the bar.

"A-and, then I'd add, 'Way yeah, way yeah!' and a little, 'And they go, they go!'. Please don't kill me, it was a lot more funnier as an idea."

Nijika groaned. "Why am I not surprised? Kita-chan gets tap dancing and a cool skit, but Ryo's best friend gets public humiliation."

"Hey. You should be honoured to be my best friend." Ryo stated, switching gears when Nijika side-glared at her. "I mean, you'd kill in a banana suit."

"You bet I do. I'd look fabulous."

"Then, my second idea was for you to learn breakdancing."

"Why is *that* your second idea? Below the banana?"

"Priorities, Nijika. Priorities."

Nijika banana. I bet Nijika eats a lot of bananas. A banana a day means you ate a banana on that day.

This took sooooo long to get out, not because it was hard to write. Been really on and off on this for a long while, and I'm glad to finally have finished it. Funny blue and red girl do the funny scene from the funny game where a funny blue guy fights his brother, who is a funny woo hoo red guy.

Bocchi will never be a comedian. She is a funny person though. Silly guitarist.

Two other sidestories before the big boy chapter comes out, which honestly I want to write that first. Idk, might actually do that, so...

Next thing I write comes out whenever!

Interlude V

Chapter 26: Interlude V

Hitori duels with her sister. Wait, another duel?

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The sun blisters in the open skies as the air is coated in heat. Tensions do not waver, as in one particular household, two sisters are matched in a staredown. A staredown of the century.

On one side was the talented guitarist of Kessoku Band; on the other was her kin. Despite the age and height difference, both shared a common resolve, where neither were willing to bat their eyes away from each others' gazes.

For Hitori, she felt very uncomfortable. The heat didn't make her sweating any better, as she felt like if she were to stay even longer, she would become the next swamp monster to be featured in the news. She always wanted public recognition, but not like that! Yet, her unwavering gaze remained, for she could not lose to her opponent. And especially to her opponent.

Her grip on the table tightened, her eyes started to twitch and her second-thoughts of bailing plagued her mind, yet she did not falter. She could not - nay, she mustn't!

Ryo's binges of English operas were evidently starting to affect Hitori.

It was like looking into a mirror, except if her reflection was younger, bratty and a general nuisance that she loved. Blue eyes stared back at her, as her little sister continued to go on strong. Was it normal for

someone of her age to stare for so long? Will it affect her sister's eyesight in the long run? Is it even normal for anyone to stare for this long?

Stop getting distracted, Hitori! She cannot win! There's too much at stake.

Hitori agreed with herself. Indeed, there was too much at stake. If she were to lose now, not only will she suffer the worst humiliation in her life (Futari's teasing is the worst, Hitori would know), but also would have wasted so much time. She could've played her guitar, or... studied. Or... well... umm... write lyrics?

Ok, Hitori didn't really have much hobbies outside of guitar and Kessoku Band.

But now was not the time to think of how sad that was! She would have to mull over it later. Her current situation demanded the very best from her, and she would be foolish not to give her all.

Hitori's body pumped with adrenaline when she saw her sister nearly blink, almost sighing in disappointment when she widened her blue orbs. She could not let that dishearten her; if anything, it was a sign of weakness. A weakness to exploit. She would feel more bad for her sister, were it not for the unbearable strain she was also going through. And the fact that this was her gremlin of a sister. She couldn't lose!

Any second now, Futari. Then, I'll be the victor and-

"Umm..." Hitori's dad emerged from the kitchen, just finished with washing the dishes. "Honey, why are our daughters... uhh..."

"Staring at each other's souls?" Hitori's mother finished his sentence. "Hmm, not sure really."

"Did I... not cook enough karaage again?"

“Ah! That’s it.”

The two watched their daughters continue to stare at each other.

“Sooooo, should we-”

Hitori’s mother waved her hand. “Let them be. They aren’t hurting anyone. Besides, they’re bonding!”

“By hurting their eyes? I don’t think we even have the aircon on.”

“Oh, it’s fine. How does that saying go? ‘The sharpest tools are made in the strongest fires’?”

“That’s definitely not how it goes.”

“You know what I mean, honey.”

Hitori’s father remained unconvinced.

“I’ll keep an eye on them, don’t worry.” Hitori’s mother reassured.

“*sigh*, alright.”

Hitori went to bed with the driest eyes known to man...

... and a satisfied stomach.

Worth it.

Futari then teases Hitori the next day, as she calls in sick to Starry. Poor Hitori.

A little goofy thing I wrote in like a hour. For something planned at least a month in advance, this is kinda miniscule (wow, big word).

Don't mess with karaage in the Gotoh household.

Next thing I write comes out whenever! Thank you for all of the support!

What Ifs: I

Chapter 27: What Ifs: I

Nijika goes out, with an unexpected guest.

Hi there! So this is something new. I wanted to write something that was kinda non-canon to the main storyline of this, so here it is! (weird saying non-canon since technically all of this is non-canon, but you get what I mean)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Nijika woke up feeling like a truck was on top of her.

Her eyelids were still heavy, her limbs refused to budge, yet she sat in her bed, awake. She tried to remember what she did last night; maybe she didn't go to bed at the right time. She was always particular with her sleep schedule, especially with how much she has on her plate.

The alarm went off, though Nijika had a feeling that it wasn't the first time it did this morning. She allowed the blaring noises to turn into white noise as she continued to lay there, the soft breathing being the only thing piercing through Nijika's ignorance of everything else. As leader of Kessoku Band, she needed to have sharp ears, in case there was a bandmate not playing in tune or the right notes. It was imperative for... her to...

Yeah, she did not want to think about Kessoku Band right now.

Nijika eventually groggily sat up, feeling as if she was pushing a boulder. She scrambled to get her phone, nearly dropping it on the floor before finally turning off her alarm. She sighed upon looking at the time.

Off by three hours. Didn't I used to be better at this?

Being a little bit more aware, she found that she was slightly drenched in sweat. Probably from her sister's attempt of waking the blonde up - she always knew how particular Nijika was with her bedroom temperature. She already knew her hair was a mess, dreading the nightmare of having to comb through it. She felt like she just slept in a swamp.

Attempting to shake off the non-existent weight on her shoulders, she shambled off her bed to go to the kitchen. She missed breakfast, so she had to cook some lunch for her and Seika. She didn't even know if they had any food for cooking, but she was running on autopilot at this point.

"Morning, Niji." Seika greeted the blonde corpse that entered the living room. "You look horrible."

"... mmm..." Nijika hummed, already checking their fridge for something to cook.

"Umm, you, uhh... don't need to - I ordered delivery. Yeah."

"... oh. Thanks."

She hazily rummaged through the cupboards to prepare some coffee, rubbing her still-heavy eyelids in an attempt to keep her eyes open. She struggled to stay upright, holding onto the kitchen counter as she waited for the water to heat up.

"It's from your favourite place. The delivery." Seika said, still on the couch. She wasn't watching anything on the TV.

“Mmm.”

Seika sighed. “You used to be so giddy whenever we got food from there.”

“So what?” Nijika snapped, turning to glare at her sister. Her glare softened when she saw Seika’s look of concern. “S-sorry.”

“Didn’t sleep well?”

“Something like that.” Nijika yawned.

“You’ve been waking up like this for the past two weeks, Niji. You need to-”

“Take better care of myself, yeah, yeah.”

Nijika poured herself a cup of coffee, grimacing upon taking a sip.

“Coffee doesn’t do a good job of replacing good sleep.” Seika stated. “Trust me, I’d know.”

“Of course you would.” Nijika took another sip. “You’re a walking zombie in the mornings.”

Seika scoffs. “Was that a joke?”

Nijika grunted in response.

Seika sighed again.

Getting better, I guess. Oh Nijika...

Nijika laid out everything on the table: Chinese take-out, from her favourite restaurant. She felt a little bit better seeing everything that she was going to eat; it really was her favourite place to eat, as she distinctly remembered one time yapping to Seika about how everything tasted amazing, yet stayed sort of healthy enough for

multiple meals. She even integrated a little bit of Chinese flavours in her own cooking too, which always turned out to be a resounding success. It made sense why everytime she would cook with those flavours in mind, Ryo would... drop by...

Right. Guess that won't be happening any time soon.

What's left of Nijika's appetite went through the window.

"You good?" Seika asked, already seated. "Gotta eat while it's fresh."

"Y-yeah. Still sort of out of it." Nijika sighed, taking a seat. She took some fried rice and fish to her plate.

The sisters ate in silence, which wasn't uncommon for the both of them. Though, there was something different. Nijika felt as if the air around them got more tense, and she was weirdly hoping it would stay that way. Then, she wouldn't have to-

"So... how's college?" Seika asked, attempting to break the ice. "You never really tell me about-"

Nijika suppressed a groan. "Fine." She picked at her fish, already planning not to eat it.

Seika stuffed a piece of broccoli in her mouth. "Niji, c'mon. You have to give me more than-"

Nijika slammed on the table. "I said, it's fine. College's fine. *I'm* fine." She took a bite into her fish. Tasted good. "I haven't failed any of my subjects, if that's what you're worried about."

It took a moment for Seika to respond. "T-that's good to hear."

The dining room fell silent again as the two blondes continued to eat, the younger one eating far less than the older. Nijika hoped the silence would stay.

Of course, it wouldn't.

“You know, Bocchi-chan and-”

“Stop.” Nijika cut her sister off. “Don’t go there. *Please*. ”

“Niji. They’re worried about you. You haven’t texted them anything, and they’ve been calling me nonstop about you.”

“Well, tell them I’m fine. Everything’s fine.” Nijika played with her rice.

“No, it’s not!” Seika raised her voice. “It clearly isn’t.”

“Then why do you keep acting like things are, huh?” Nijika scoffed. “What, you forgot what happened?”

“I haven’t, Niji! Nobody has! It’s just...” Seika composed herself. “... life goes on.”

Nijika’s glare hardened.

“Nijika, please listen. They’ve been taking all of the shifts back in Starry, even if they come in sick or t-tired. They haven’t had time to check in on you with how busier their lives have become. They really do care about you.” Seika explained, trying to defuse Nijika’s temper.

Nijika took a deep breath.

She sat up from her seat. “I’m going out.”

“Nijika? Nijika, wait-” Seika tried to grab onto Nijika’s arm.

Nijika yanked Seika’s hand off her. “Don’t you have work to attend to? *A life* to get back to?” She stormed off to the bathroom. “Leave me alone.”

With a slam on the bathroom door, Seika was once again left alone. She sighed as she packed away the dining table. At least they wouldn’t have to buy food for a few days with all of the leftovers.

She’d have to tell the others that Nijika wouldn’t be coming in today.

Meanwhile in the shower, Nijika was mulling. She couldn't believe it. Her own sister, already moving on, while Nijika was left in the dust. Didn't she too know what happened? Why Nijika can't just carry on living, like everything's a-okay? The gall of her sister!

Yet, there was a small part of her that agreed with her sister. The part of her that wanted things right - that wanted things back to normal. There wasn't anything she could do to change what had happened. Besides, she still had her friends, right? Kita-chan? Bocchi-chan?

...

No. She had every right to be angry. She should be touched by her friends' gesture, but honestly she couldn't bring herself to care. And if they really cared, wouldn't they have visited her? Like weeks ago?

Not wanting to think about the band anymore, she speedran the rest of her shower. She combed her hair, brushed her teeth, and hopped into her bedroom to change.

Hoodie and jeans will do.

Nijika decided to not tie her hair with her signature ribbon. She hasn't been tying her hair since two weeks ago, and she really doesn't want to go through the trouble. She's already drained enough, and she just woke up.

She doesn't even know where her ribbon went. Like she cared enough to go find it.

She begrudgingly picked up her phone, seeing many missed calls and messages from her friends. Some from Hiroi, some surprisingly from PA-san, and a plethora from Kita and Hitori. She even received some messages from Ryo's parents, and a bunch from her classmates.

She ignored all of them, slipping her phone in her pocket.

Emerging from her bedroom once again, Nijika found a note on the dining table. It was from Seika, reminding Nijika to take the spare key. She even wrote that she could call Seika anytime, if she needed anything.

Nijika crumpled the paper, tossing it in the nearby trash can. She took the spare key and left.

Upon hearing the sound of the door's chime, the old man got up from his seat. A customer!

"Hi, welcome to..." The old man greeted, but paused as soon as he saw who came in. "... my, don't you have a green thumb."

"Hehe, yeah..." Nijika held her arm awkwardly.

"Well, don't let me stop you, young lady." The old man gestured Nijika to come in. "Let me know if you need help with picking something."

"Thank you. You're too kind." Nijika bowed, shuffling into the florist.

Nijika went through the familiar isles, scanning through each type of flower she came across. She was always impressed at how well all the plants were taken care of, despite her multiple visits. She somewhat knew of the tiring process of taking care of a plant; what more a whole shop's worth. She respected the old man's dedication to his craft, as she admired his numerous bouquets of flowers. It kind of reminds her of Ryo's... dedication... to...

Nijika's breath hitched, a bit loudly in the quaint store.

"A-are you alright, ma'am?" The old man rushed out of the cashier. "I'm sorry, I really should have allergy warnings here."

Nijika stifled a sob, wiping away a stray tear. "I-I'm fine. Only allergic to... cats. W-was allergic to them." She picked up a small basket of

flowers. "I'll have these, please."

"Ah, blue orchids." The old man took the basket. "You know, they aren't naturally blue. Heh, had to dye them myself."

"I see." Nijika nodded along.

They walked over to the cashier, as the old man went behind the counter. Nijika watched expectantly, letting the old man do his thing.

"Regardless, they are elegant." The old man snickers. "I say that with all of my flowers. Might be a little biased."

"Yeah..."

"Funny thing, all my orchids keep getting sold out because of high demand. I mean, can't complain, helps my business!" The old man wrapped the flowers in a simple bouquet. "Sorry, did you want a different bouquet wrapping?"

"No, that will do."

The old man nodded. "These are always in such demand, since this store is so darn close to the cemetery. I just wish people would buy other flowers, and appreciate the beauty of them! Not just come in here to buy flowers whenever they pay a visit to their loved ones."

Finishing wrapping the bouquet, the old man looked up to see Nijika. He hummed.

"Look ma'am. I may be old, but I'm not that thick. I appreciate you coming here to buy my flowers, but... err, how do I say this delicately?" The old man pondered. "You've been coming here awfully often. Buying only flowers for, well, a deceased person."

That struck a nerve in Nijika.

"I won't pry further, considering that it was already rude of me to ramble a bit in front of a customer." The old man chuckled. "But... at

some point, you have to-”

“I know.” Nijika butted in. “I know.”

They continued the transaction in silence.

As Nijika was about to leave, the old man hollered, “Hey, ma’am?”

Nijika turned.

“I hope, one day, you come in here to smell the flowers.” The old man grinned. “I think sunflowers would suit you.”

Nijika gazed down. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Nijika left the shop, the chimes ringing behind her. Though not the first time she heard their ringing, she found them sounding a little more eerie.

Maybe she needed more sleep.

Nijika looked up as she got closer to where she wanted to be, seeing the distant grey clouds approaching. She sighed.

Should've brought an umbre-woah!

Nijika flinched and recoiled from whatever grazed her leg. She clutched her chest as she saw the floof that just interrupted her thoughts.

“Ni... jicat...?” Nijika hesitantly uttered. The cat mewed in response, albeit a little quieter and soft from its usual meows.

Nijika took a breather as she eyed the feline. Though its fur was much more grimy and unkempt, Nijicat’s trademark fluffy coat was still intact. The vibrant orange has dulled to a colour more akin to brown; Nijika guessed it has been a while since Nijicat bathed. Its

ribbon was forgone, probably lost without someone to retie it back on its neck.

Nijika rushed to check on the cat, relieved to find it somewhat well-fed.

It is a stray, after all.

She sighed. "Must be nice being able to live life, as if things are normal."

Nijicat just tilted its head in confusion.

"Don't follow me. Please." She stood up, shaking her head. "You remind me too much of her."

Nijika began to walk away, stopping in her tracks when she heard pitter-patter behind her.

"Nijicat, please. Scurry off. I don't want to see you."

Nijicat almost whimpered.

"P-please."

"Meow..."

"Oh, who am I kidding." Nijika pivoted to tackle the cat. Both sat by the sidewalk, as Nijika hugged the cat tightly.

She silently sobbed as the cat began to purr. Already, Nijika felt better, even if just a little.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Nijicat." Nijika choked. "I miss her too much."

They laid there for a while, the brisk wind and the soft purrs only being heard.

Once Nijika calmed down, she let go of the feline.

“It... hurts to see you, Nijicat. But... I at least owe it to your owner to keep you safe.”

Nijicat blinked.

“Right. Cat.” Nijika sighed. “C’mon. Let’s go visit her. Together.”

Nijika swore she saw the cat glow in cat-gee, as it meowed in a more chirpy tune. For the first time today, Nijika smiled. Small, somewhat strained as Nijika felt almost unnatural when she did, but a smile nonetheless.

“Good thing I went through that immunotherapy a while back.” Nijika almost chuckled.

Nijicat took off ahead of Nijika, having the blonde to lightly jog to keep up.

“H-hey! Wait up!”

Out of breath, the young blonde arrived at where she was planning to visit: the cemetery.

“G-geez...” Nijika huffed. “Makes me glad I went on all of those jogging trips with Kita-chan.”

Nijika sagged slightly.

Kita-chan...

A meow broke through her thoughts, coming from an all-too-familiar feline with an all-too-familiar face.

“Oh, shut it you.” Nijika spat, pushing past Nijicat.

She walked down the familiar trail she had grown accustomed to, reminiscing all of the times she’s been here. In the past, cemeteries always creeped her out. She wasn’t a believer in ghosts or the

undead, but felt really uncomfortable knowing that she was basically walking in dead bodies. She understood that graves and coffins and all that were to give respect to the dead, but it never failed to irk her whenever she'd even be near a cemetery. She also didn't like visiting the cemetery with other people in it. She felt awkward hearing other people lament, especially when it was supposed to be a very personal thing.

Now, she didn't really care about all that. She was here to visit her friend.

Thunder boomed in the skies as Nijika continued walking, relieved to find the place empty. The pitter-patter of Nijicat crept just behind her as Nijika stopped.

"Here she is." Nijika sighed, staring at the grave of Ryo Yamada.

It happened so fast. One day, Ryo called in sick - said that she didn't feel too well. From her tone of monotone in her voice, Nijika knew she wasn't making it up, so she told the bluehead to get some rest. She was confident that she would bounce back; despite the sedentary lifestyle Ryo had, the bassist surprisingly recovers fast from sickness. And besides, her parents were doctors! She pretty much has direct access to their hospital 24/7, which Nijika would admit to be a bit jealous about.

The next time she heard from Ryo, it was on her hospital bed.

She remembered rushing into her hospital room, tucked away in some corner of the hospital. She got there first, faster than even her other bandmates. She couldn't stop bawling her eyes out as she was forced to watch Ryo slowly die.

"Heh." Ryo grunted, before violently coughing. "G-guess we never decided on my funeral music, eh Nijika?"

"Y-yeah." Nijika sniffed. "Guess we didn't."

She died the day after. Something that even the best doctors couldn't figure out. Virus, cancer, genetic disorder; nobody really knew. But that didn't matter.

Ryo was *gone*.

Nijika remembered the absolute misery that followed within the first week after Ryo's passing. She didn't eat, sleep, or do anything really - merely existing and only existing. It was torture. The only time she was dragged out of her room was when she had to attend Ryo's funeral.

That only made her absence stung harder.

However, slowly but surely, Nijika got her act together. She had to enroll into college someday, even if she'd rather dig a hole and sit there. She tried to come into Starry to help out, but all that did was remind her even more of Ryo. She stopped going after a few visits, no longer able to bear the grief.

And throughout all this, her bandmates were there. Kita-chan, Bocchi-chan. Her sister. Even PA-san and Hiroi-san. She truly was grateful for their support in the first weeks, seeing as she was the most hurt besides the Yamadas.

But, as the days went on and their lives got busier, Nijika regressed. Kita and Hitori began to take more shifts due to Nijika's absence, as they struggled to juggle preparing for college and their work. Whenever Nijika would pop in Starry, the guitarist duo would try to convince her to play with them. It'd always be shut down by the drummer, before she'd storm off.

"It's not the same without her." Nijika would say.

Nijika felt angrier and angrier as the rest went on with their lives. The many check-ins and visits to Nijika were becoming sparse, leaving the blonde to think over everything. They went on living, as if nothing had happened. Especially Kita and Hitori. How could they even set

foot in Starry, without being painfully reminded that their bassist was dead?

When she got too tired to get angry, she just stopped caring. About college, about her friends, about... everything.

And now she's here, once again, facing the source of all of her suffering.

Nijika placed the small bouquet of blue orchids by the grave, eyeing the other flowers she placed in the past. Most of them were orchids in a variety of colours, though some were carnations or lilies. They've all lost their vibrant colours, dulled and wilted from lack of care. She didn't even know why she kept on buying more after her first, yet she felt obligated to do so. As if she owed it to Ryo.

Nijika would laugh at the irony, if Ryo weren't buried six feet under.

"I was never really a plant person. Neither were you." Nijika sighed. "But, hope this makes you feel better Ryo."

Again, thunder boomed, making Nijika scurry next to the grave. It laid beside the grave, just underneath the flowers.

"I've been good. Well, good as I can be." Nijika wiped a tear. "I haven't been to Starry in ages. I can't stand being in there without you. And especially when surrounded with the others."

Nijika balled her hands into fists.

"They don't understand. You're the heart and soul behind Kessoku Band! Without you, anything we play is worthless! And yet, they're so persistent. Like, if we just play together really well, everything will be back to normal. *Tsk*. They even suggested getting Hiroi-san to play with us!"

Nijika ran her hands through her hair.

“It’s just... ugh! Not the same!” Nijika yelled, sinking to the floor. “It’ll never be...”

Nijika’s breathing grew harder as she tried to keep in the crying.

“*Why did you have to leave me?! Why couldn’t you just mooch off me for the rest of your life? At least then, you’d still be here with us. You’d still be here for me...*”

She couldn’t hold back her tears, letting them flow freely as she wailed. Thunder boomed, even closer than before, yet Nijika continued to cry.

“I m-miss you Ryo...” Nijika got out through her sobs.

It began to drizzle, but it didn’t faze Nijika. It did scare Nijicat, who moved to take shelter underneath Nijika. The blonde instinctively held Nijicat tightly, letting her hands run through its fur.

Thunder boomed once again, yet the tears kept pouring on the grave.

“You can stop here!” Kita asserted, fumbling to hand the taxi driver a wad of cash. “Keep the change, thank you! C’mon, Hitori-chan!”

“Ah, y-yes!” Hitori nodded, following the redhead out of the taxi.

Kita pulled out her umbrella as Hitori swooped beside her, the rain already pouring hard. The taxi disappears into the thicket of the rain, leaving the two guitarists on the sidewalk.

“We’ve got to hurry! She’s probably drenched by now!” Kita hastened her jog.

“R-right behind you.” Hitori reassured.

Splashes of water darted across the sidewalk as they inched closer to the cemetery, neither of them sharing a word. They passed by the

entrance, following the path they too were familiar with. The intense rain made it hard for both girls to see what's in front of them, so they relied on their memory for the way.

"S-she should be around here..." Hitori muttered, loud enough for Kita to hear under the storm. "Th-there!"

Following Hitori's finger, Kita spotted a crouched figure in the rain. It was hard to make out who it was, but they both knew there was only one person who would be out here. The very reason why they scrambled out to get her when it started to rain.

"Nijika-chan!" Kita yelled, stopping just behind the blonde.

Nijika slowly turned, bewildered to see Kita standing above her. She got up from crouching over Ryo's grave. Nijicat, upon losing its only shelter, zipped under Kita's umbrella, nuzzling against Hitori.

"K-Kita-chan?" Nijika stuttered, voice still croaky from crying so much.

The two guitarists looked at the absolute horrid state the drummer was in: hoodie and jeans completely drenched; eyebags under eyebags; the slight shivering of the blonde; the many tear stains left on her face.

"W-we need to go." Hitori said, picking up Nijicat and pulling out her own umbrella. "Now."

"You should leave me-"

"I'm *not* taking no for an answer!"

Kita and Nijika were aghast; even with the pouring rain, Hitori's voice pierced through. It sounded so... foreign.

"Bocchi-chan..." Nijika whispered, eyes widening.

"Please." Hitori offered her free hand. "We... n-need to talk."

Kita nodded in agreement. "We can take shelter in the nearby cafe here."

"I... I..." Nijika trailed off.

She wanted to cry again. She wanted to plop back down and cry next to Ryo all day, even with the rain. She didn't want to talk with them - she didn't deserve that. She was livid at them, for crying out loud!

And yet...

"I'd like that."

The trio managed to find the cafe Kita had mentioned, all sitting around a small coffee table. Kita was glad to have picked some spare clothes from Seika before they left, as Nijika changed into dry clothing in the bathroom - the staff were very understanding. Surprisingly, Hitori was the one who ordered drinks for the girls, though as the waiter left the pinkhead looked as if she's walked through a whole world war. Meanwhile, Nijicat was sitting in the vacant seat, snoozing peacefully after being dried. Kita was also glad to have brought extra towels.

"Isn't this a bit overkill?" Kita had asked, prior to leaving with Hitori. "It's not even raining that hard, Manager."

"Just take it." Seika practically shoved the towels into Kita's bag. "Now go. Find my sister. P-please."

Emerging from the cafe bathroom and enjoying her 'no-longer-soaked' state, Nijika watched Kita soothe the shaken Hitori back to normal. She smiled at the sight.

Still the same old Bocchi-chan.

Her smile quickly vanished.

Unlike me.

“Oh, welcome back Nijika-chan!” Kita beamed. “Hitori-chan here ordered our drinks for us. Isn’t that cool?”

“Ah, hehehe, it’s n-nothing much...” Hitori bashfully said, though her face begged for more attention (as usual).

“Yeah.” Nijika slumped on her seat.

The radiance from Kita and the giddy giggling from Hitori both abruptly stopped, as the two guitarists looked at each other.

“...”

“W-what?” Kita asked.

“How do you two do it?” Nijika mumbled. “Move on like nothing’s happened?”

“A-ah-”

“Like, do you both even know what happened?” Nijika scoffed. She looked at her hands.

“Every time I see you both. Without Ryo. It hurts.” Nijika balled her hands into fists. “Don’t you get it? It *hurts*. It hurts to see you both try to play with me. It hurts to even step into Starry. It hurts to see you two now.”

Nijika sighed. “So please. I appreciate you two, but... just leave me alone.”

The trio sat in silence, with an assortment of sounds from the barista only filling the dead air. Not one of the girls could look at each other, all mulling over their own thoughts.

“N-no.”

“What?” Nijika squawked.

“No. We d-did not come all this way for you t-to push us away again.” Hitori said.

“That’s right!” Kita joined in. “And if some storm can’t stop us, who can?”

She tuned her voice to a more serious tone when Nijika didn’t budge.

“Nijika-chan. We aren’t here to get more help for Starry; nor are we here to get the leader of Kessoku Band. We’re not here to get our drummer back! We’re here... for you. Just you, Nijika-chan.”

“S-sorry we haven’t tried to visit you, Nijika-chan. We’ve b-b-been busy with work and Kita-chan’s studies for college.” Hitori added.

Nijika remained still, looking away from the two.

“N-Nijika-chan?”

They heard her sniff.

“W-why?” Nijika trembled. “Why do you still care?”

“B-because we’re frien-”

“I mean, *why* do you still care?!? I’m a mess! I haven’t practised in who know how long, I’m barely hanging on in my studies, I sometimes don’t get any sleep at all from all the times I cry myself to bed, I’ve *avoided* you two for so long, and it’s all because of-”

“Because we miss her too!”

Again, Hitori had to raise her voice to dispel Nijika’s rambles. The other two gawked at the pinkhead, as she coughed lightly.

“S-sorry.” Hitori mumbled. “But... we miss her too.”

“... Ryo-chan’s our friend.” Kita said. “We know how you feel, Nijika-chan. Really.”

Kita twiddled her thumbs. “I still remember the week after Ryo-chan...” She wiped a stray tear. “It was so hard to get out of bed everyday, knowing that when I go to Starry, she wouldn’t be there... ever.”

Hitori looked like she wanted to say something, but decided not to. A little nudging from Kita later, Hitori spoke up.

“I-eh, umm. I had it w-worse.” Hitori almost whispered, before speaking louder. “It was o-only because of Kita-chan that I g-got out of my cl-closet... and even then, it t-took so long for me t-to step outside of m-my house.”

Kita took a deep breath. “We’re hurt too. Not just you. And, the only reason why we’re able to m-move on-well, kinda- is because we have each other.”

“Y-yeah!” Hitori perked up. “Kessoku Band isn’t just the band, Nijika-chan.”

Hitori smiled. “We’re friends.”

“Til the bitter end!” Kita added with whatever aura she had left.

“G-guys...” Nijika muttered.

“So, y-y-you can rely on us!” Hitori exclaimed. “Together, we can get through this! M-maybe. I think...”

“Hitori-chan, have more confidence!” Kita poked at Hitori. “But, like she said. It’s... what Ryo-chan would want us to do.”

“M-mhmm!” Hitori agreed. “Ryo-chan wouldn’t want us to disband just because she’s g-gone.”

All the while, Nijika sat there and listened. At first, she wanted to respond in anger. Personal feelings aside, they both knew that Ryo made their music, right? She's their composer, so without her, their music wouldn't sound the same. And she's their bassist! How were they supposed to replace her iconic style of playing?

She shook her hands as they balled into fists. She was ready to slam the table and lay onto them why she can't move on. Ever.

"And Ryo-chan definitely wouldn't want us to stop being f-friends just because she's gone too."

She was going to. Right?

...

But Nijika was tired.

She knew deep down that she was wrong to be so angry. She was so caught up in being angry and jealous, she didn't really consider what the others were going through as well. She should've had more faith in her friends. She should've healed together with them, rather than push them away. She should've been less selfish.

What have I become?

"N-Nijika-chan!"

"W-woah!"

Both guitarists were tackled by the blonde, as she embraced them tightly. She began to sob, as Hitori and Kita returned the hug.

They stayed like that, comforting each other.

"Here's your..." The barista came up with their drinks.

"Mew!" Nijicat meowed at the barista, now wide awake from its nap.

“I’ll... come at another time. Yeah.”

Once Nijika felt like she cried a waterfall, she ended the hug.

“S-sorry guys. I’ve been such a jerk lately...” Nijika sniffed, wiping her face with a napkin. She slightly blushed when realising that she probably looked horrible in front of Kita and Hitori.

“We know how much Ryo-chan means to you.” Kita reassured. “It’s ok.”

“No. It’s not. That doesn’t excuse me from being horrible to everyone. To you two especially. C-can you... forgive me?”

“Nijika-chan.” Hitori said. “Losing Ryo-chan was like losing a part of you, r-right? We feel the same way.”

Nijika was left shocked, lightly slapping Hitori’s shoulder in embarrassment.

“You really say some of the coolest stuff when you want to...” Nijika blushed harder. “Thank you Bocchi-chan, Kita-chan. Really.”

“I know, right?” Kita agreed, her aura charging up.

“N-no...” Hitori squirmed.

“Here’s your drinks.” The barista finally slipped in, serving each of their drinks. “I k-know it’s none of my business, but... wishing you guys the best.”

“Thank you!” Kita replied in glee. Nijika smiled at the sight, slowly shaking off the unusual feeling that came whenever she even attempted to smile.

Her rust began to shed off as she noticed Kita’s drink.

“Still sweet, huh?” Nijika smirked.

“Yup!” Kita sipped her iced tea. “Already with the sassy remarks, Nijika-chan?”

“What, too early?”

“Just a little.”

The two laughed.

“And... hot chocolate?” Nijika picked up her drink. “I never told you-”

“I asked your s-sister what your favourite drink was!” Hitori cutted in. “W-well, next to lemonade. I-if you don’t want it, I can-”

“No, no! No need, Bocchi-chan.” Nijika blew into her mug, taking a sip. “Ahh~ This is perfect. Thank you, Bocchi-chan.”

“Ah, hehehehe, it’s nothing. Ehehehehe...”

“We really need to work on that.”

“Ah, yes.”

The three began to talk about what’s been up with their lives, catching up and enjoying each other’s company. Despite not running on much sleep nor energy, Nijika was already brightening up, ever so slightly.

I missed this.

“Look! The storm’s gone!” Kita pointed outside the window.

“It is.” Hitori said.

“We should head back.” Nijika stood up. “Need to apologise to my sister for being a grade A jerk.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand, Nijika-chan.” Kita said.

“Yeah. Sis loves me too much to hate me.”

“That sooooo cheesy!” Kita picked up Nijicat.

“Mrrow!”

“See, Nijicat agrees!”

“Of course the cat agrees.” Nijika shook her head.

Kita was the first one to leave the cafe, already running to chase after Nijicat, who began to scamper off somewhere.

“You ready to go Bocchi-chan?” Nijika turned back to Hitori.

“Y-yeah.” Hitori stood up. “B-b-but, just one thing. Nijika-chan.”

“Hm?”

“Remember. She lives on, here.” Hitori placed her hand on her chest.

“W-well, she isn’t g-gone. Like, gone gone.”

“Huh?”

“Like s-she still lives on through you. A-and Manager too.” Hitori planted her hand atop of Nijika’s head, rubbing her hair lightly. “I’m s-sure your mother is proud of you.”

“Right.” Nijika smiled, now feeling as natural as ever. “Thanks, my hero.”

“Heheheheheh-”

“Not now, Bocchi-chan! We’re about to leave!”

“A-ah!” Hitori solidified back to normal.

“Hmm, actually.” Nijika pondered as she left the cafe with Hitori. “Can we make a quick visit?”

“Hey Mom! Hey... Ryo.” Nijika grimaced at how weird that sounded. “Mmm, not used to it yet. You better not be giving my mother a hard time up there.”

Hitori giggled. It has been a while since she saw Nijika talk with her mother.

“S-shh.” Kita shushed Nijicat, who was squirming in Kita’s arms. “Nijika-chan’s talking!”

“I’m... sorry. Sorry for being a jerk to Kita-chan and Bocchi-chan. Although... understandable - I guess - I know you raised me better than that, Mom. And, I know you would never want me to be like that, Ryo.” Nijika bowed in front of Ryo’s grave.

Nijika sighed, a little lighter than her usual sighs. “Nevertheless, I’m still here.”

She looked back to her band. “We’re still here. And we’ve still got each other.”

Both guitarists smiled and nodded.

“Honestly... it still hurts. Knowing that you won’t be here when we eventually hit big.”

The guitarists’ smiles widened upon hearing that.

“But... we’ll make it. Because nothing can stop Kessoku Band!”

“Yeah!” / “Y-yeah!” / “Meow!”

“I... don’t know when I’ll get back into my groove. It’s been so long, and it’s the last thing I want to do with college and all that.”

Breathe in. Breathe out. Nijika looked to the stars.

“So, keep watching us, ok Ryo? We’ll wipe that smug smile off your face when you see us on TV! And... we’ll make you proud. You and Mom.”

Nijika placed her hands on her hips.

“Ok, but really. Be nice to my mother, ok? Mom, if she tries to ask you for money, let me know. Once I get there, I’ll give her a taste of her own medicine.”

“N-Nijika-chan...” Hitori muttered.

“Sorry, sorry. Old habits die hard.”

Nijika yawned. “I’d like to talk to you both more, but I’m beat. And, I do have college tomorrow.”

Kita winced upon hearing ‘college’. “Ugh, why’d you have to remind me?”

“Anything you two want to say to my mom. A-and Ryo?”

Kita immediately brightened up. “Yes! Hi Miss Ijichi! Your daughter is very lovely and I am glad to have her in my life! We’ll make sure Nijika-chan’s dream stays alive and well!”

Kita cleared her throat. “A-and Ryo-chan? I’m... gonna miss you. I’ll try to get Sattsu to dance with me - we will have a Kessoku Band dance choreography! S-someday.”

Nijicat meowed.

“Oh, and I’ll take good care of Nijicat too! Isn’t that right, Nijicat? Yes I will! Hehe~”

Hitori walked up, next to Nijika. “H-hi again, m-ma’am. Kita-chan kind of took what I w-wanted to say, but I am truly grateful for h-her life. I

can s-say that I am a better person because of her.”

Nijika began to tear up. “G-guys, don’t make me c-cry again!”

“Oh, s-sorry, sorry, sorry-”

Nijika ruffled Hitori’s hair. “You’re okay, relax. Though, you have nothing to say to Ryo?”

“A-already did.” Hitori pointed to her head. “Introvert psychic connection.”

“Woah, really?” Kita exclaimed.

“That’s not a thing.” Nijika deadpanned.

“I-it is!”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t know what to say to Ryo, huh.”

“N-n-n-n-yes.”

Nijika snorted. “It’s fine. You can save what you want to say to her when we talk with her next time.”

Hitori smiled, which morphed into a horrified expression.

“I didn’t mean it like that!”

With a sigh, Hitori retreated back to the redhead, who was giving Nijicat some belly rubs. Nijika turned back to face Ryo’s grave.

“Talk to you soon, Ryo. Goodbye.” Nijika said, lingering her touch on the gravestone for just a bit longer.

Together, the three headed back, with Nijika tugging on her sleeves a bit harder than usual.

The winds got much colder all of a sudden...

Upon hearing the door chimes ring, the old man once again got up from his seat. A customer... no, wait. Customers?

"S-s-sorry for the intrusion..." A pink-headed girl stuttered as she slid inside the florist.

"Hitori-chan! You don't need to say that when we enter a store." A red headed girl came in right after, bubbly with a bounce in her step.

"Oh, hi!"

The old man chuckled. "Well, well, well. It's been a while since I've seen new faces around here. Any special event?"

"Nope!" A familiar voice rang from behind the two girls as the blonde stepped in. She had her hair tied up in a ponytail to the side, reaching up to her knees in length. Although now wearing more frilly and bright clothing, the old man recognised the blonde.

"We came in to smell the flowers! I-if you don't mind." Nijika bashfully said.

"Hahaha, aww..." The old man chuckled again. "Take all the time you need, ladies!"

"Thank you!"

Nijika directed the trio through the whole florist, making sure they got a good look at each flower for sale. Of course, Kita couldn't help but snap a terabyte amount of pictures every isle they passed by; meanwhile, Hitori gravitated towards the unusual plants the florist had: cacti, venus fly traps, even some exotic plants that the pinkhead had no idea even existed.

Nijika was browsing some flowers when the old man came up to her.

“Heheh, you know, you didn’t need to bring them along to help my business.” The old man said. “It’s a passion first, then a business. I’ll be fine with a couple of dry days.”

“Actually, they insisted.” Nijika admitted. “They’re getting into gardening, especially since one of my friends has a large garden with nothing in it.”

“Oh? A new hobby?”

“Something like that!”

“Well, that’s great to know.” The old man smiled.

Nijika smiled back, going back to browsing for some flowers.

“Looking for the sunflowers?” The old man asked.

“Eh? How’d you...” Nijika trailed off. “Right! You did suggest those to me.”

“Indeed I did. They suit you better now.”

“Yeah. They do.” Nijika agreed.

“If you guys want, I could teach you some basic gardening.” The old man suggested. “Of course, if you can spare the time to listen to an old man’s rambling, heh.”

“Sure! Kita-chan and Bocchi-chan will definitely appreciate that!”

Before leaving the florist, the trio sat near the front counter as the old man went over some of the basics of gardening. Nijika managed to scribble down some notes for her sunflowers, while Kita typed on her phone. Hitori gave her full attention to the mini-lecture, unfazed even with the old man questioning why the guitarist was laser focused on his face. All in all, the girls learned many new things as they left, thanking the old man for his wisdom.

“Siiiiis, I’ll be fine. Just a quick visit!” Nijika nonchalantly said into her phone. “I need to catch up with Ryo. Promise I’ll be quick.”

Her phone blared with Seika’s voice. “While I’m glad you are spending time with her, the dinner table needs food. And no way on Earth am I making PA-san or Hiroi cook.”

Nijika shuddered. She remembered what the kitchen looked like when she walked in on their cooking.

“Nearly burnt the whole place down...” Seika muttered. “Anyways, make it quick. Or-”

“You’re gonna get hangry. Ok Sis. It worked when I was 12, but I don’t think it works so well on a young adult.” Nijika sighed.

“Hey. Mean.”

“Says the meanie~”

Nijika parked the moped near the cemetery’s entrance, double-checking that the chain was hooked around the bike parking stand.

“Alright, I gotta go.” Nijika said.

“Stay safe Niji.” Seika responded.

“I’m touched by your lack of faith in me.”

That got both sisters to laugh.

“And... thanks Sis. For being patient with me.” Nijika genuinely said.

“I’ve only got one sister, Niji.” Seika said back. “Glad it’s you.”

“Oh my gosh, Sis! You’re such a sap!”

“Says you, weirdo.”

“Ahahaha, o-okay. Fair. See you later.”

Nijika slipped her phone into her pocket as she readjusted her grip on a pot of sunflowers she was bringing. She groaned when her phone vibrated, just having found the best grip.

“hey, Nijika-chan?”

“have you seen Nijicat? can’t seem to find the cat”

Nijika sat down on a nearby bench to reply to Kita.

“Nope, sorry.”

“Though, I do have a good idea where the floof is.”

“really? where?”

“I think you know where.”

“do i?”

“Mrrow!” Nijicat chirped as it skitted towards Nijika, hopping onto the bench.

“Hello there, little guy!” Nijika ruffled its head. “Give Kita-chan a big smile!”

‘A picture of Nijika and Nijicat, the latter on the former’s lap.’

“thank goodness Nijicat’s fine!”

“Yeah, I’m good too Kita-chan. Don’t need to worry about me.”

“hey! i didn’t mean it like that!”

“Thanks again for taking care of Nijicat btw. Its fur is as fluffy as ever!”

“hehe, of course! that cat gets more pampering than I do!”

“Alright, ttyl. Visiting Ryo atm.”

“ok! i’ve got assignments to work on anyways. tell her I said hi!”

“Will do, Kita-chan.”

Slipping her phone back into her pocket once again, Nijika took a deep breath.

In the past, cemeteries always creeped her out. They still do as she was uncomfortable knowing that she was basically walking near dead bodies. She understood that graves and coffins and all that were to give respect to the dead, but it never failed to irk her whenever she’d even be near a cemetery.

But today? She didn’t feel creeped out at all. She was here to talk with a good friend. Her best friend.

“Ready to visit Ryo?” Nijika picked up the pot, remembering the hand placement for the best grip.

“Meow!”

“Heh. Cat.”

Nijika laid down her pot of sunflowers next to Ryo’s grave, surprised to see another pot of flowers. It was pink roses (Nijika could tell by the shape), most probably from Kita and Hitori as a collective effort. They seem to be in healthy condition too - Nijika guessed they too have been visiting here often. From what she’s searched, they can

be hard to take care of, but she knows that the two guitarists are capable.

Especially Hitori, who has turned her garden into a mini-rainforest, with all of the weird and wacky plants she's been growing there.

"Hehehehe, w-what do you guys think?" Hitori giggled as she unveiled to Nijika and Kita her magnum opus.

"Umm, i-it's nice! Real nice!" Nijika stuttered, suppressing her shock at what she was seeing. Some of the plants she saw looked too cursed to be real.

"W-where did you get all these?" Kita asked.

"Oh, I d-did some searching online. Many people sell s-some interesting plants there, eheheh..."

"Is... is that weed?!?"

"A-a-actually, it's cannabis! P-pretty cool, huh?"

Nijika reminded herself to visit Hitori's place again some time soon. To make sure she isn't growing anything illegal.

"Hey there, blueberry cheesecake." Nijika greeted Ryo. "Sorry it has been a while, life's been busy. Kita-chan says hi."

Nijicat snuggled itself by the flowers.

"Things have been good. My college grades have been going up. A bit slow, but I'm improving. Who knew that studying hard pays off? Of course, you wouldn't know. You must be struggling up there, without me taking care of you. Poor thing. Don't bother my mom too much, ok?"

Nijika sighed.

“We’re playing again next month. Can’t believe I’m actually getting back out there. Playing the drums and stuff. Kita-chan managed to learn the bass too. Still on the basics, but she’s pretty much got them down. She’s got Bocchi-chan’s approval. We told her she didn’t need to, but she insisted. Said that she’d be honouring your legacy. Her words, not mine.”

Nijika twiddled with her thumbs.

“You know Ryo, sometimes I think... about everything. About Sis sacrificing her place in her band for Starry. About me and you, and Bocchi-chan, and Kita-chan, and Kessoku Band. Wondering if it was all worth it. Everything we’ve been through. The highs and lows. The wins and... losses. Maybe we would’ve never met were it not for Kessoku Band. Maybe not.”

Nijika sat down, leaning on the gravestone.

“I’m scared, Ryo. I... don’t know what to do after our next performance. I haven’t planned for us in forever and... song making is gonna be a lot harder with you gone, and although Bocchi-chan’s willing to take your place as composer... n-no offence to her, and I really do mean that. But... it might just not sound the same. I don’t even know if we’ll all find the time for practice, with college taking a big toll on me and Kita-chan.”

Nijika huffed.

“Sorry for being such a downer. I know you’re probably chilling too hard up there. And... maybe I should too. Take a chill pill, or however you put it.”

Nijika stood back up.

“But we’ll get through it, just as we’ve always done. We’ll get so big, you can’t ignore us from up there!”

“Meow!” Nijicat joined with Nijika’s declaration.

“Heheh, your cat agrees!” Nijika gave the cat some scritches.

Nijika stretched. “Ok Ryo, I have to go. There’s a certain someone that needs food on her plate. And no, that’s not you. A-actually, do they have food there? I’ve, err, never really given that some thought. I always assumed that you just... don’t eat. Like ever. There’s not really...”

Silence.

“Right. Guess I’ll know once I’m up there with you. I’ll be coming here more often now. These flowers won’t take care of themselves on their own.”

Nijika placed her hand on the gravestone.

“Goodbye Ryo. I miss you.”

And with that, Nijika left, carrying Nijicat out with her. As she was leaving, she saw an elderly couple huddled around a grave.

She smiled.

“Guess we’ll never know what it’s like to grow old together, huh Ryo?”

“Nijika.” Ryo hummed, lazily hanging on the Ijichi’s couch.

“If it’s food, then wait for another hour. Might as well wait for dinner.” Nijika replied, switching channels to find her favourite one.

“It must be nice to be old.”

“And wheeeere did that come from?” Nijika swivelled her head to the lazing bassist.

“Just was thinking, is all.” Ryo grunted. “Like, being retired and all that. You’ve got so much free time to do whatever, and if you’ve got

family then you get to enjoy your remaining time with them."

Nijika pondered on Ryo's words.

"Yeah. I guess it must be nice to have that freedom. Not needing to work or worry about anything. Well, except your health."

"Ehh. My patented 'all-you-can-eat-is-grass' diet should keep me alive and well, even as I grow old."

"You'll be eating more than just grass, you know."

"Well, that depends on if I have kids."

"W-what?!" Nijika screeched.

"You heard me." Ryo hummed.

"W-w-why are you being so... thoughtful for once? I'd never expect Yamada Ryo to be thinking about her future."

"Eh. Food for thought."

Silence fell upon the room as the two watched the TV flicker though the different channels. Why was it so hard to find the one Nijika liked was beyond either of them.

"How I see our future..." Nijika thought out loud. "Might be wishful thinking, but I see us. Kessoku Band. Still playing music. Maybe we'll be with a big company or something. I don't mind us staying independent. We've done pretty well so far. Hmm... I might still be living here with Sis, especially since I'll be having to take care of her."

"Mm. I can totally see Bocchi still playing with her wrinkly hands."

"Don't say wrinkly."

"Wrinkly."

"What did I just-"

"Wrinkly hands. Old hands. Old woman hands. Just got out of the shower hands."

"Ughh."

Nijika gave up finding the right channel, turning off the TV and flopping onto Ryo.

"Peh. Your hair went into my mouth." Ryo spat.

"How does it taste?" Nijika smirked at Ryo.

"Like hair."

"Which tastes like?"

"Hair. Nijika, I'm not sure what's more to-ow."

"Don't play smart with me."

Nijika continued to lay on Ryo's legs, her eyes growing heavier by the second. Maybe a little nap wouldn't hurt. It would keep Ryo in her place longer, not that Ryo ever wanted to leave her place.

"I wanna grow old with you." Ryo declared.

"I... thought that was obvious?" Nijika rubbed her eyes and sat up to tilt her head at Ryo. "You know, when you said that 'mooching off you' line?"

"I wanna be able to look back at all that we've done as Kessoku Band. And be proud of it. I wanna do elderly stuff with you guys. Like bingo. And eating without teeth. And-"

"Ok, ok, geez. I get you!" Nijika covered Ryo's mouth before it spouted more. "You'll have to wait quite a while before you get to experience your fantasies."

Ryo removed Nijika's hand from her mouth. "I never said they were my fantasies. Just would be nice to experience. With you."

Nijika flashed a look, unconvinced.

"Hey. You're still down a point, Nijika." Ryo grinned, sitting up to get a good look at the blonde.

"Am I? We'll have to see about that!" Nijika hardened her gaze at Ryo.

The two got locked into another staring contest, neither wavering in their sight.

I was inspired to write this when I visited my grandfather during All Souls Day.

Remember, non-canon. Yamaha Piano Company Bassist Player is still alive. She's probably doing the default dance from Fortnite right now. Silly Ryo.

Honestly, this took a lot to write, with how busy finals made me and the weird scenes I had to write. I like writing the haha funny and the occasional serious moments, not the other way around! Especially with how Nijika-centric this what if story is - it's hard to see such a joyful and happy person become depresso espresso. Even now I still feel like there are things to improve, like the pacing in some parts, but I'm still happy with what came out.

Thank you if you've read everything, including these notes. I really do appreciate it. Next thing I write comes out whenever.

p.s: yes, i did get sidetracked on writing the big Chapter 12 for this.

p.p.s: yes, i know i couldve wrote this on a brand new fic instead of including it in here, but big view numbers make my brain happy

Chapter 12: Prelude

Chapter 28: Chapter 12: Prelude

Ryo asks a certain friend for dance lessons.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Yo, whatup Yamads?” A certain green-haired girl greeted Ryo as she entered the dance studio. “Glad you made it fine, ya feel me?”

“Uhh, hi Sasaki-san.” Ryo waved, ignoring Sasaki’s weird dialect. “I brought Nijika for our dance lesson today, hope you don’t mind.”

“That alright. Tho’, where she at *dawg* ?”

“Don’t call me dawg.”

“R-right here! Ehehe...” Nijika awkwardly shuffled beside Ryo. “S-so, when do we start? Hehe...”

Sasaki eyed the blonde, confused at why she was wearing a banana costume. And a really, really good one at that.

Might wanna ask her later where she got it. Being a banana for a day seems funny.

“Didn’t know your homegirl had that banana drip, sheeeeeeeeeesh~” Sasaki complimented (?) the poor blonde.

“I know right. She’s a killer in that.” Ryo agreed.

“Oh, shut it you!” Nijika bonked Ryo. “Why couldn’t I have waited until we got *here* to put this on?”

“Cuz you look beautiful.”

“Fo’ sure. You lookin’ fire!” Sasaki added, doing a weird hand sign.

“Don’t try to make me feel better!”

“Anyways, where’s my homie Kita at? It’s usually you and her for these sick dance lessons.” Sasaki asked, leaning over to see past Nijika.

“Oh, it’s just us two. We need help for an upcoming performance.” Ryo stated.

“Ah, gets. So... a rapper and a banana?”

“It’s her idea.” Nijika nudged Ryo.

“Hmm. Well, lay it on me what you have in mind, Yamads.” Sasaki said.

...

“What.”

“Ok, ok, I know that sounds bad... might’ve sounded better in my head.” Ryo protested.

“So *now* you admit it!” Nijika groaned.

“No, no. Ya boy can make this work.” Sasaki affirmed. “M-maybe...”

“... ya... boy?”

“Let me cook, let me cook. Just gimme a few minutes.” Sasaki waddled off to a corner of the studio to brainstorm.

“Alright, let me know when you think of something.” Ryo yelled at her.

The rapper and the banana stood, awaiting for Sasaki's great idea to make this skit work. Nijika rocked back and forth, while Ryo tried to make an assortment of sounds with her mouth.

"So..." Nijika broke the silence. "Did we really need all of this space?"

"No, not really." Ryo shook her head. "But this is where I usually meet with Sasaki-san for our dance lessons. At first, she was on-board with teaching us hip-hop moves, but when me and Kita told her about tap dancing, she was surprisingly interested."

"She does tap dancing?"

"Nope. Had to learn it. Though, she is an amazing dancer. If there's anyone that can make this work, it's her."

"And how did you two meet up?"

"Oh, Kita connected the both of us while I was planning our tap dancing. That's why I'm not paying for this."

"Huh. Neato."

"What, you actually thought I just knew how to tap dance?"

"W-well... yeah?"

"Nijika, I'm cool but not *that* cool."

"Hmph, yeah. You aren't that cool."

...

"Wait-"

"Did you just agree... that I'm cool?"

"N-no, no, no. Don't get that twisted, young la-"

“Wow, I... can’t believe it. I’m tearing up...” Ryo wiped her tears.

“Hey! That’s not what I-”

“Ijichi Nijika, actually thinking that I’m cool...”

“Stop that!”

“A d-dream come true... huhu...”

“Enough!”

“Aight, I’m back!” Sasaki came back to their corner. “And I’m getting some real good... vibes?”

Sasaki stopped, witnessing a raging banana barrage a rapper with a flurry of (painless) punches. What really amazed her was how many punches Nijika was laying on Ryo, as she kept on going and going. Sasaki couldn’t tell if Ryo was crying from the pain or if she was ticklish.

“And so, I kinda took a video of it.” Sasaki hummed. “Here, I can show you right now on my-”

“A-ah, no need.” Hitori declined.

“Your loss. It was really funny.”

“Ughhh...” Kita groaned into her arms, slumped over her desk.

“What Kita? I have a good sense of humour.”

“Not that, it’s just that... why did you speak like that?” Kita groaned again.

“Oh, that?” Sasaki gave some thought. “I dunno, it sounded funny. Had no idea what half of the words I said meant though.”

“So *why* did you have to say them out loud *here* ?”

Sasaki looked around the classroom, finding numerous classmates eyeing her as if she were an alien. Kita buried her head more into her arms; any more and she'd go through her desk.

“C'mon Kita, it's not that cringy.” Sasaki attempted to comfort.

“It is!”

“Although, I was thinking of saying... ‘What's poppin', yall?’ or something like that. Sounds cooler.”

“Nghhh....” Kita sank lower into her seat.

“O-or, maybe, umm... ‘What's good in the hood?’” Hitori suggested.
“Hehe, s-saw that on OhTube...”

“Yeah, that might sound better. Help me with this, Gotoh-san. This is important.”

“Y-y-yes ma'am!”

“Ughhhhhhhh...” Kita whined. “I feel like you two are doing this to torment me.”

“W-what?!?”

“Kita, as your best friend, I would never.” Sasaki said, which earned her a glare from Kita.

Kita softened her expression. “Well, at least Ryo-chan is learning a lot from you.”

“Y-yeah! Ryo-chan's performances are v-very fun to watch! I could n-never do something like that...” Hitori added.

Sasaki raised her eyebrow. “Well... we do have space for one more student, hmmm?”

“N-no! Too soon!” Hitori withdrew into her tracksuit shell.

“Nah, I’m kidding.”

Hitori yelped as Kita glared at Sasaki again.

“Oh, I mean whenever you feel like you’re ready.”

Hitori sighed in relief as Kita nodded.

“So, what is their performance anyways?” Kita asked. “I heard that Nijika-chan was going to be part of it.”

“W-why not you?” Hitori asked.

“She didn’t ask me. Not that I mind.”

“Ryo-san told me specifically not to tell.” Sasaki replied. “Said it’s a surprise.”

“Alright then. Looking forward to it!” Kita shone, blinding Sasaki and Hitori.

“M-m-me too!” Hitori stuttered, mostly from Kita’s aura.

“Ahahaha...” Sasaki awkwardly laughed, thinking back to Nijika’s... apparel. “Don’t put up your hopes too much.”

Sasaki reveal. It's really hard not to think of her as 'Ryo but green', which now that I think about it is similar to Sonic and Scourge. They have similar mannerisms and me writing Ryo to be closer with Kita here doesn't help. But from the minimal appearances she has in the manga, I'll do my best to write her differently.

Finally, some Chapter 12 content. Wanted to write something short and sweet after what I wrote beforehand. Just a prelude to the main thing, which will be big. Look forward to that!

You can probably guess what Nijika and Ryo are gonna do as their performance.

Chapter 12

Chapter 29: Chapter 12

It's Christmas in a little live house! What does Kessoku Band have planned for their Christmas party?

A ton of notes at the end. Just FYI, if you like reading more after reading a lot.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

"W-wanna call it quits here, Nijika-chan?" Kita huffed, wiping some sweat off her brow.

"... s-sure... hoo..." Nijika heaved. "Need some r-rest for later."

The two shambled to the usual bench near Starry, finally able to collapse onto something after two straight laps around the city - which was Kita's idea, to Nijika's dismay. They shared in breathlessness, trying to stabilise to talk to the other.

A few minutes of panting (and Nijika holding in what she had for lunch, but Kita didn't need to know that), Kita spoke.

"You're getting a bit faster, I've noticed." Kita commented, still breathing heavily.

"I'd be surprised if I wasn't, considering how often we do this." Nijika replied. "But seriously, this thick clothing I'm wearing isn't helping!"

"Yeah, it tends to stick to your skin easier. It's that or become a popsicle. A Nijika-isicle!" Kita beamed.

“Bet I taste good.”

“N-Nijika-ch-”

“I didn’t say anything.” Nijika coughed. “A-anyways, hahahaha... starting to feel what Sis was talking about, I feel much better with some exercise in my life!”

“Hehe, and I get to spend time with you!”

“Aww, how sweet. I... might get diabetes if you keep that up.”

“What do you mean? I love spending time with you!”

“Stop... too much sweetness...” Nijika clutched her chest.

“Besides, you do so much for the band. It’s the least I can do for how well you’ve led us, both as a band and as friends!”

Nijika made drowning noises.

“Ok, I’ll stop.” Kita chuckled. “Sheesh, you’re over dramatic when you want to be.”

“Guess where I get *that* from.” Nijika smirked.

Both laughed.

“But on a serious note, thanks Kita-chan. For this. I feel like I don’t get to spend as much time with you compared with the others.” Nijika admitted.

Kita raised her eyebrow.

“Ok, ok! Thank you for keeping me in shape!” Nijika said, before murmuring, “I still meant what I said...”

“That’s what I thought~” Kita hummed. “Though, I do have to agree with you. We... don’t really hang out, huh. Outside of band related

stuff, or when we go visit someone's house."

"I-is that a... problem?"

"No! Not at all! I think the time we do spend together is more than enough! It's fun hanging out with you all, whether as Kessoku Band or not! You guys are my second family!"

Nijika pondered. She did recall Kita saying it before, but she never really gave it much thought. Kita was the type of person to value relationships, seeing as she was basically the walking definition of social interaction within their group. Meeting so many people, she imagined that Kita truly values certain people in her life. Not out of malice or from a place of hate, since asking one person to care about many is a gigantic task. Nijika struggles taking care of her band and her sister, she couldn't fathom what it's like to care for hundreds, if not thousands of people; keeping in check with their daily lives, their struggles and challenges. It sounded tough.

She remembered when Kita called them more casually, dropping the 'senpai'. Honestly, Nijika didn't really care about all that - thank a certain blueheaded bassist - but she knew that Kita did care. Nijika was quite elated when she started calling Hitori by her first name, even despite her calling Ryo by her first name. She shared the same feeling when Kita called her 'Nijika-chan'.

It was nice. Like Nijika was gaining a family she, to put it bluntly, never really had after her mother passed.

And so, Nijika smiled.

"I'm glad you've found a place with us. Might've said that before, but whatever." Nijika said. "And... I'm glad to have met all of you."

"Awww~" Kita cooed. "Save the heartfelt speech for tonight, Nijika-chan!"

“Oh, right! Tonight!” Nijika shot up from her seat. “I still have to make sure all the decorations are up properly.”

“You don’t trust that Hitori-chan and Ryo-chan have got that covered?” Kita asked.

“Remember when we first visited Bocchi-chan’s house?”

“Th-that only happened once! I’m sure Hitori-chan got better at decorating afterwards!”

“Guess we’ll just have to see for ourselves. To my house! To shower!”

“Yeah!”

After readjusting themselves from suddenly getting up, the two walked back to Nijika’s place.

“You know, I’m starting to get why Ryo likes Sonic so much.” Nijika said.

“W-what’s a... Sonic?” Kita hesitantly asked. Despite being terminally connected to social media, video gaming never was part of it.

Nijika sighed, before going on a long spiel of what Sonic is and Ryo’s attachment to him. She even had to show her a picture of Sonic, something that Ryo would definitely tease her about if she ever knew.

“Wow... didn’t know she was into that. A hedgehog that runs fast. Huh.” Kita said.

“Eh, she’s like that with most of the things she’s into. She’ll only talk about them to people she’s close with.” Nijika explained.

“Aww, that’s cute! B-but why did you say that you get why Ryo-chan likes Sonic?”

“Hmm, well. Running around wherever you want to at breakneck speeds, able to see the world whenever. That sounds pretty liberating.”

Nijika snorted.

“Reminds me of all the lectures I had to sit through of just Ryo explaining Sonic lore.”

Kita giggled. “You are her best friend, so it makes sense.”

“Unfortunately. Kita-chan, you do *not* want to sit through one. I’m not kidding when I said ‘lectures’. Seriously, she talks more than she does in a week whenever she gets started...”

“That sounds like Ryo-chan alright!”

“Ahhh... what’s with running and being oddly thoughtful? A-and reflective?”

“HMMMMMMMM... I dunno. I guess your mind has to do something while you run, right?”

“I expect it to keep me alive, but now that you say that... yeah, I get you.”

The two arrived near Nijika’s place, entering the elevator.

“You have spare clothes?” Nijika asked. “Just making sure.”

“Yup!” Kita pulled out her clothes from her bag. “Wish I brought something more fitting for our party later, but I didn’t want to wrinkle good clothes!”

“I still don’t get how you fit that stuff in such a small bag...”

“Some things are better left unknown, Nijika-chan~”

“Riiiiiiight.”

“There’s just something about showering in somebody else’s house that feels soooooo nice!” Kita exclaimed as the ketchup and mustard pair left the Ijichi household.

“Kita-chan, you’re bordering Ryo territory.” Nijika grumbled.

“She does have a point, you know.”

“I’m sorry I respect people’s households and only shower at *my* home.” Nijika pushed the ground floor button.

“Ok, gentlewoman. Put this on!” Kita almost walloped a Santa hat on the blonde.

“Wah! What’s this?” Nijika yelled, blinded by what just got put on her head and maybe Kita. “And why is it so itchy...”

“Santa hats! Y’know, to make up for not having costumes this year?”

“... I’m more concerned with, uhh, how they fit in your bag.”

“Nijika-chan, get into the Christmas spirit! You don’t have to be such a grampus.”

“No really.” Nijika peered into the abyss. “How does it fit in there?”

“Careful, Nijika-chan. You might get trapped in there if you fall in~” Kita jiggled her bag in front of the blonde.

“Gah!” Nijika stumbled back. “I will find out one day, Kita-chan. Just you wait...”

The two left the elevator and were now on the street, the bright lights from Starry just in the distance. There was already a bunch of decorations strewn by the entrance: small ornaments lay on the flower bed; flashing Christmas lights wrapped around the railings; even a wreath on the entrance.

Nijika whistled. "I'm impressed. Didn't think Bocchi-chan and Ryo could do all this. Kind of excited to go inside now."

"Have some more faith in them! They're perfectly capable!" Kita lightly scolded.

"Yeah, maybe I should."

Nijika and Kita entered the livehouse.

"What could possibly go... wrong."

Nijika's excitement evaporated the moment the two stepped down the steps. The first thing Nijika saw was a kiddie pool in the middle of the livehouse, where small fishes were swimming in. A large and crude air pump was unceremoniously doing its thing, lying just next to the pool. To the right, near the stairs, was... something? She wasn't so sure what it was - maybe someone was trying to replicate modern art, with all of the unrelated decor cobbled together in the corner. To the left were actual Christmas decorations, thankful that the bar and the sound booth were decorated appropriately. In fact, the place still felt Christmas-y. It could've gone way worse.

"M-m-merry Christmas!" Hitori stood up from the corner and greeted the two. "W-what do you think... ehehehe, hehehe..."

Ah, so she's the one who made... that.

"N-nice! Yeah, real nice!" Nijika gave a shaky thumbs up. "Good job, Bocchi-chan!"

"Didn't know you had an eye for art, Hitori-chan!" Kita zipped to ogle at Hitori's art piece. "What do you call this piece?"

"A-ah, I haven't thought o-of a name..." Hitori murmured.

Nijika left the two to appreciate art before she grew a headache, as she stomped over to Ryo, who was smugly nodding to herself by the pool.

“What is this?” Nijika asked in irritation.

“It really adds to the whole atmosphere, don’t you think Nijika?” Ryo stated, her back facing Nijika. “A serene pond of fishes in the middle of a chaotic party. Quite the oxymoron, isn’t it?”

“The only oxymoron here is you. *Why* a pool?”

“Shh, shh, shh, Nijika.” Ryo sighed, placing a finger on Nijika’s lips and shaking her head. “Some people don’t appreciate the arts.”

Knowing that Ryo, probably being the only one who set up the whole thing, wasn’t willing to get rid of the pool, Nijika grumbled.

“At least... put up a sign or something. Someone might slip here.” Nijika slapped away Ryo’s hand

“Nijika, it’s a pool in the middle of a livehouse. It stands out enough for people not to slip.” Ryo pointed out.

“So you are self-aware of how stupid this thing is.”

“It’s about sending a message.”

“Your face is about to send a message once I punch it.”

“Duly noted. Your criticism is very much appreciated, Nijika.”

“Ughhh. Does Sis and PA-san know about this?”

“What the-” / “Oh, my~”

On cue, both mentioned people entered Starry, stunned to see a kiddie pool in the middle of the livehouse.

“Now they do.” Ryo said.

Nijika facepalmed as Seika rushed over to question the bassist.

“Ryo, how on earth did you get this in here?” Seika groaned. “And who paid for that air pump?”

“Don’t worry, Manager. All of this has been provided by the Yamadas. Not a single cent of yours nor your sister’s money has been spent.” Ryo explained.

“And do your parents know this?”

Ryo cleared her throat. “Sorry, on another note, how’s that food coming up Manager? We can’t have a-”

Nijika whacked Ryo.

“Thanks Niji.” Seika patted Nijika on the head.

“Anyti-**wait**.” Nijika nodded to herself before yelling. “D-did you just... pat me on the head?”

“W-what, no. I was just... missed y-your shoulder is all. Yeah, that’s it. Thought you were t-taller, is all. Stop giving me that look.”

Seika’s excuse failed to dim Nijika’s wide smile, as she fawned over her sister to do it again, while the older sister continued to decline in grumpy and tsundere fashion. Meanwhile, Ryo let out a sigh, rubbing her back.

Some people don’t appreciate the finer arts. Ow, my back.

“I-I think it looks nice, Ryo-san~” PA-san commented. “Albeit weird. But nice.”

“Thank you, PA-san.” Ryo thanked. “I can rely on you to appreciate the fine arts.”

“Y-yeah. Sure. I love a good... art... piece?”

“G-geez, you act like Nijicat sometimes Niji.” Seika reluctantly gave her sister another headpat. “Don’t expect this to be normal. I’m only

feeling this generous because it's Christmas."

"Hehehehehe, ehehehehehehe..." Nijika babbled in glee.

"Seems like we're all here!" Kita did a little headcount. "Let's get this party started!"

"A-actually..." Hitori spoke up. "W-we might have more visitors."

"Oh? Who?"

The front door burst open to reveal a set of pinkheads, all greeting a "Merry Chrsitmas!"

Ryo could only wonder what's with everyone appearing at convenient times. It's as if they were entering on cue.

"Ah, the Gotohs!" Nijika snapped out of her gleeful trance. "Merry Christmas! Will you be joining us?"

"Of course!" Hitori's father barked. "We couldn't just stay at home while you guys had your own party."

"We also want to celebrate all that you all have done as Kessoku Band too!" Hitori's mother added.

"Wow! Starry looks so amazing!" Futari beamed. "Did you do all this onee-chan?"

"Ah-hehehehehe, y-yup!" Hitori stammered. "Your big sis did all this! W-with a little help, heheheh, ehehehehe..."

"Cool! And what's this pile of trash in the corner? It looks awful!"

Hitori collapsed on the floor, turning into petrified wood.

"Hitori-chan!" Kita came to help. "D-don't mind your sister Futari-chan, she's, umm, r-really happy you all came."

“Really?” Futari tilted her head. “But when she freezes up like this, it’s usually out of embarrassment.”

“It’s a... happy freeze! Hitori-chan does this a lot here because she’s... soooo happy?”

While Kita and Futari tended to a frozen Hitori, the Ijichis welcomed the newcomers.

“We’re glad that you guys will be spending your Christmas with us. The more the merrier.” Seika warmly said. “Though, we didn’t really expect more people. You don’t mind waiting for an extra hour for the food? We’ll have to make another delivery. I have a feeling Ryo’s and Kita-chan’s families will be coming too.”

“Oh, we don’t mind at all~” Hitori’s mother waved off.

“Thank you for your understanding.”

“My, so formal Ijichi-san.”

Nijika giggled as Seika sputtered in response. She leaned over past her sister to see the front door open once again.

“Merry Christmas!” Ryo’s mother greeted. “Hope you don’t mind us joining as well!”

“The Yamadas!” Nijika walked over to greet them. “We don’t mind at all! My sister has some really good senses...”

“Dad? Mom?” Ryo asked. “What are you doing here? I thought you were busy.”

“C’mon Ryo, us busy? On Christmas day?” Ryo’s father prodded at her daughter. “We’re doctors, but even we need to celebrate Christmas. Especially with our very own Ryo.”

“D-Dad...”

“You must be... the Gotohs? Of Gotoh Hitori?” Ryo’s mother said to Hitori’s dad.

“Yup! Glad to meet you all. Would like to say, your daughter is very talented.” Hitori’s dad shook hands with Ryo’s mother. “Hitori says that she composes all of the band’s songs, and after listening to some of them - wow! I’m impressed.”

“Same goes to you! Your Hitori-san is exceptional on guitar!” Ryo’s father exclaimed. “Isn’t that right, Ryo?”

“Mhmm. Bocchi is mega talented.” Ryo nodded.

“Ahaha, we’ll be sure to tell her that. After she...” Hitori’s father turned to the redhead and both of her daughters. “... comes back to life. You know our Hitori, hehe.”

“She seems like such a sweetheart~” Ryo’s mother cooed, as all eyes directed towards the petrified Hitori, who started to come back to life, evident by her incoherent babbling.

“Oh, she is.”

“Y-yeeeeah... sweetheart.” Nijika winced.

Ryo snickered.

“Gwaah!” Hitori sputtered, taking in a breath of life. “Th-thanks Kita-chan. A-and Futari, I guess...”

“Hey! I helped!” Futari pouted.

“Ryo-chan’s family is here!” Kita whispered to Hitori, who immediately sprang to her feet.

“H-h-h-h-hi!” Hitori yelled, clamping her mouth shut, and then bowing right after.

Ryo snickered again.

First impressions are everything, huh.

“Ah, Gotoh Hitori. My daughter has talked a lot about you, all of which are very good things. We’re happy that you have met our Ryo.” Ryo’s mother greeted.

“Th-thanks?” Hitori responded.

“Well, I’ve heard that you’re quite the riot here! The ‘funny one’, as Ryo puts it.” Ryo’s father added.

“Dad!” Ryo shouted.

“Aaeuuuhhh, mmmmm, aaaaa, thank you so much I am truly honored to be called such a high title by your daughter by the way your daughter is a very lovely and talented individual and I am glad to have met her and-”

“Hitori means ‘thank you’.” Hitori’s mother stepped in. “She’s not too good with compliments, so please don’t mind her.”

“Hah! Sounds like our Ryo!” Ryo’s father laughed. “There was this one time that-”

“Dad, not now. Please.”

While the families talked, Nijika excused herself to get some drinks ready; at the corner of her eye, she saw that her sister thought of the same thing.

“Don’t worry Sis. I got this.” Nijika reassured.

“You’re making me talk to strangers?” Seika hissed in a hushed tone.

“It’s just Ryo’s and Bocchi-chan’s families, relax. I’m sure you’ll be fine!”

“There’s a reason why I’m the Manager and not reception. Or bartender.”

“Nonsense. You’re, like, 30. Or something. You never liked me keeping track anyways. Socialising should come naturally to you!”

“Easy for you to say.”

Nijika perked up when she saw the front door open.

“Actually, you can prepare the drinks instead. Maybe PA-san would like to help.” Nijika patted Seika’s back, dashing off to the reception.

“What about PA-san?” Seika blinked.

“What about me?” A voice wormed its way beside Seika.

“Ahh!”

“Relax Manager. It’s just me. Let me help~”

“A-after my heart stops beating do f-fast... geez, a warning woulda been nice.”

“Aww, you’re acting your age. How adorable!”

“I’m not that old!”

“Let’s get you signed up for senior citizenship. I’ve heard there are plenty of benefits!”

“I said I’m not that old!”

Meanwhile, Nijika greeted the newcomers.

“Welcome... Kitas? I don’t think Kita-chan told us about you guys.” Nijika bowed.

“That’s because we didn’t tell her. We’d like to join your Christmas party, if you don’t mind.” Kita’s mother bowed back.

“Merry Christmas!” Kita’s father almost pushed through Kita’s mom. “Woah, this place looks amazing! Really gets me into the Christmas spirit.”

“Ah, hehe, thank you! Come in, come in! We definitely don’t mind more friends and family!” Nijika gestured both to enter. “The Yamadas and Gotohs are here too.”

“Oh? I’d love to meet Hitori-san’s folks! I’m sure they’re lovely.” Kita’s father got giddy.

“I’m sure they are, honey.” Kita’s mother chirped in.

Upon entry, the Kitas joined in the conversations, meeting with the other families. Nijika sneaked over to the bar to prepare some more drinks, spotting Seika in a corner making another delivery order. Spirits were high and many conversations were had, as each family got to know the other.

“So, Yamada-san.” Kita’s father started. “I’ve heard that your daughter has been teaching Ikuyo... dancing?”

“Yup! Well, more like learning together. Don’t know where she got it from, but she loves doing it!” Ryo’s father replied. “I know more than anyone not to stop my daughter’s passion projects.”

“And she’s really good too!” Kita added, already shining. “Ryo-chan really makes sure that our dances are superb. Ehehe, we’ve only done one dance performance though.”

“Really?” Ryo’s mother said. “We see her practise all the time back at home.”

“Ooh, looking forward to whatever she has planned!”

However, said girl was far away from the conversation, again looking at her masterpiece of a decor.

“Ah, Ryo-san. Fancy seeing you here.” Kita’s mother appeared beside Ryo, also looking into the pool of fish.

“M-Miss Kita?” Ryo murmured, looking over to her and Kita’s families. “Shouldn’t you be, and will all due respect ma’am, over there? With them?”

“Unlike Ikuyo’s father, I’m not so into socialising. Besides, I’ve always wanted to talk with the illusive Yamada Ryo.”

“M-me?”

“Ikuyo talks fondly of you, other than Hitori-san.”

Not knowing how to respond, Ryo blushed slightly and remained silent.

“That’s a good thing, Ryo-san.” Kita’s mother reassured.

“A-ah, yes.”

Kita’s mother giggled. “Ikuyo is right, you are fun to tease~”

Ryo was now an inch away from cosplaying as a tomato.

What am I supposed to say to that???

“Y-yes, I am?” Ryo blurted out.

Great, now I’m stuttering like Bocchi. Sorry Bocchi.

Kita’s mother giggled again. “So, why the kiddie pool?”

Ryo shook her head to clear her thoughts (mostly to make her blushing disappear). “U-um, well. A normal pool wouldn’t fit-”

“I mean why have it at all here? Out of everything here, it sticks out painfully.”

“Artistic expression, ma’am.”

Kita’s mother shot her an unimpressed look.

“I’m something of an artist myself.”

“Ikuyo does mention how skilled you are with music, seeing as you pretty much make all of your band’s music. According to her, at least.” Kita’s mother said. “I’m actually a bit curious about the creative process for Kessoku Band’s songs.”

Ryo internally sighed.

Something I can talk about.

“Oh, well it depends. You know that Bocchi-”

“That is, Hitori-san? Correct?”

“Yes. Bocchi writes our lyrics, and I compose our songs. We both don’t really have a strict system, but it generally comes down to...”

Ryo continued to explain in exquisite detail how the song creation process works. Her tension slowly withered away as she got further and further into the topic, all the while Kita’s mother nodded along intently.

“Fascinating. Would you say that it’s easier to make songs with the lyrics first or instrumentation first?” Kita’s mother asked.

“Hmm, hard to say honestly. I’d like to say that having the lyrics first makes my job easier, but sometimes I feel that I limit myself if I do that. Or sometimes, I feel that I limit Bocchi’s creative writing to have to make something song worthy.” Ryo replied. “I care more about us making what we want to make, rather than making something good to listen to.”

Kita’s mother smiled. “That’s... notable. Hmm, reminds me of when I used to be a writer. Having that passion to make what you want to

make. It's no wonder Ikuyo is so persistent in sticking around with you guys."

"Mhmm. She's a vital part of our band. Irreplaceable."

"Alright, alright. Hitori-san already convinced me, so you don't need to say more. But, I appreciate it nonetheless. I'm sure Ikuyo does as well."

The two fell into silence as they watched the fishes swim about in the small and horribly unfitting kiddie pool.

Meanwhile, Nijika heard the front door open once again.

"Welcome!" Nijika greeted. "S-Sasaki-san?"

"Hi. My family are all asleep this Christmas, and Kita told me about you guys celebrating here." Sasaki explained. "So, is it ok if I join you guys?"

"Yeah, sure! The more the merrier!"

"Cool. Also, I found Ryo-san's cat." Sasaki held up Nijicat.

"Meow!"

"A-ahh, nice!" Nijika slipped on a mask. "Ryo should be by the... pool."

"Pool?"

"She'll explain."

"S... sweet. Also, I found some drunk lady constantly murmuring about being let in here." Sasaki pointed behind her. "Is she... someone you know?"

Nijika groaned. "Sadly. I'll let my sister decide if she can join us. I feel bad enough knowing she's alone and still drunk tonight."

Ushering Sasaki and Nijicat in, Nijika zipped by her sister, who was still 'preparing' drinks.

"Siiiiis..." Nijika shook her head upon finding her sister still pouring pineapple juice. "I know you had to make that delivery, but with PA-san's help you should've been done ages ago!"

"W-what? There's a lot of people here!" Seika protested. "And PA-san was of no help. At all. Yup. None at all. Useless as usual."

Nijika swivelled her head and spotted said person in her natural habitat, scrolling through her phone. When they met eyes, PA-san merely waved and mouthed "Just go with it."

"Whatever. Might want to put on a mask. Nijicat's here." Nijika paused. "No, not the WWII o-actually, why do you have that?"

"History was always my favourite subject back in high school." Seika reminisced, putting on a normal mask. "Good times."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Yeah it does."

Nijika sighed.

This is why people struggle to talk with you, Sis.

"Also, Hiroi-san is outside-"

"Really?!? Ughh, I told her *not* to come here!" Seika stomped off outside, probably to give a choke hold on the bassist before shoving her inside the livehouse and offering her some pineapple juice. At least, that's what Nijika thought.

With a sigh, she finished preparing the drinks as she went around. Sasaki has comfortably slipped into the group with Ryo's and Kita's families, where even Ryo and Kita's mother joined into the conversations.

“So, you taught my daughter all that she knows about dancing?” Nijika heard Ryo’s father say. “My, what a feat! Especially with how stubborn Ryo is to learn anything.”

“I specialise in hip-hop, but I’ve always wanted to branch my dancing to other genres.” Sasaki said.

“Me and Ryo-chan have been learning a lot from Sattsu!” Kita added. “Even though it’s new stuff for her, she’s managed to teach us well!”

“Aww, that’s sweet. Try not to become Japan’s best dancer now, dear.” Ryo’s mother teased, pinching Ryo’s cheek.

“Mom...” Ryo grumbled, making everyone laugh.

Leaving that table with enough drinks, Nijika then headed over to where the Gotohs were. They were still checking up on Hitori’s condition.

“How many fingers am I holding up, onee-chan?” Futari held out her palm.

“Y-your whole hand?” Hitori responded.

“Eh. Good enough.”

“Oh, hi Nijika-chan!” Hitori’s mother greeted the blonde as she set down the drinks. “We were just making sure Hitori over here is fine.”

“I am fine, Mom!” Hitori yelled, before burying her face into her hands when she saw Nijika.

“Bocchi-chan’s pretty loud with her folks, huh.” Nijika commented.

“You would not believe how much she raises her voice at home, believe it or not Nijika-chan.” Hitori’s father chuckled.

“Yeah! She hurts my ears sometimes with her voice! It’s awful!” Futari said.

Hitori murmured something after, but all Nijika could hear was "... my ears hurt when you speak all the time..."

"Actually, I do need some help back at the bar. Quite the packed night, hehe! Mind helping me out, Bocchi-chan?" Nijika suggested.

"Yes!" Hitori immediately responded. "A-ah, I mean-well, i-if I-"

"Just c'mere." Nijika grabbed onto Hitori's wrist before she could have second thoughts. "Bye! Enjoy the rest of the party!"

The two headed over back to the bar, nearly bumping into Hiroi.

"Oh, sorry Hiroi-san! Didn't see you there." Nijika apologised.

"Guessing Sis let you in."

"That's right! It's cuz of my irresistible charm!" Hiroi struck a pose to seem more alluring, but it seemed more like an awkward bend of her body than a pose. "A-and cuz I have nobody to celebrate Christmas with..."

"R-really? I thought you would h-have lots of people to hang out w-with, onee-san." Hitori said.

"Not my fault Shima has family and Eliza has... actually, I think she just doesn't want to celebrate with anyone." Hiroi lamented. "Ohh, if only I had people I could-"

"Yeah, yeah, you can stay with us." Nijika rolled her eyes. "As long as you don't get any more drunk."

"You were saying something?" Hiroi cracked open a can of sake.

"Heh, you had the saaaaaaaame response as Seika did, little Seika!"

"W-well, they are sisters..." Hitori giggled, earning a glare from Nijika. "Umm, I m-mean, of c-course. Since y-you're drunk... and stuff."

“Enjoy the party, Hiroi-san.” Nijika tried to welcome the bassist, but all it did was make Hiroi shiver. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

“R-right.” Hiroi hid her can of sake.

She then scampered off, probably to bother Seika for the whole night. With Hiroi gone, the two made it inside the bar.

“Seeing as there’s more people, we should prepare at least...” Nijika counted the additional people in the livehouse. “... maybe five more drinks?”

“D-does Nijicat count?” Hitori asked.

“What?”

“N-nevermind...”

Save searching ‘do cats drink pineapple juice’ later tonight.

As Nijika opened the fridge to get some pineapple juice, something about the blonde caught Hitori’s eye.

“N-Nijika-chan. Your h-hand.” Hitori meekly pointed at her.

“Hmm? What about it?” Nijika checked on her hand. “Seems normal to me.”

“M-may I hold it?”

“O... kay. Sure.”

After an internal debate on whether or not Hitori was worthy of touching such a fine maiden’s hands (and internally slapping herself for being weird about touching a friend’s hand), she held Nijika’s hand. A bit tough and stiff, yet still felt soft and somewhat reassuring. Hitori’s gaze focused on Nijika’s fingers.

Ah. They are shaking slightly.

“I’ve n-noticed that your fingers can’t s-stay still when your hand isn’t d-doing anything.” Hitori noted.

“Ah, haha, must be me getting nervous. Especially since we have to kinda set an example with so many families here.” Nijika waved off. “Don’t mind me, Bocchi-chan.”

“A-and you’ve been swaying a l-little.” Hitori’s voice grew quieter.

“I did technically just come from a really long jog with Kita-chan, so I must be tired. It’s nothing I can’t handle. Just enjoy the celebration!”

Nijika finished pouring the last of the drinks, turning to find Hitori giving her a look of concern. Or a look of being terrified that she might blow up. It’s really hard to tell with the pinkhead.

“I’m worried f-for you, is all...” Hitori peeped.

Nijika sighed and slumped on the counter. “Darn your cute perceptive owl eyes.”

Hitori didn’t know how to respond, so she hummed in agreement.

“You were probably thinking of asking me why I am busying myself on such an occasion.” Nijika predicted, which made Hitori choke on air.

Waiting for Hitori to recover, Nijika continued. “I wasn’t entirely lying when I said I’m nervous. As leader, I am the person to go to when it comes to our band. Have to give a good impression and all that.”

Nijika looked back at Hitori, who still had a look of concern.

“Should’ve known you’d see through that as well.” Nijika smirked.

“I-is that bad? S-s-should I shut my eyes forever?” Hitori yelped.

“No, no. In fact, it’s a good thing. Friends don’t tell you everything.”

“Ahh, y-yeah.”

Nijika and Hitori looked around, the pinkhead waiting for the blonde to speak. They saw each of their families talking with each other: Futari playing with Kita and Sasaki, the fathers laughing at each other, the mothers and weirdly Seika probably talking about their children (though, Seika looked like she wanted to disappear badly), even Hiroi and PA-san looking at the fishes, with Nijicat trying to paw at them.

Though Hitori somewhat resented Christmas in the past for its cheery atmosphere that makes spending it alone seem depressing, she changed her mind now looking around the livehouse. It was one thing to know as many people as Hitori knew, but it was another to actually see them and some of their families in the same room, all in high spirits. She couldn't help but smile at such a warm sight. Maybe, Hitori didn't need to always spend such occasions alone.

Hitori found that the same couldn't be said for Nijika, who was almost frowning at the sight.

“I'm glad everyone's enjoying themselves.” Nijika finally said. “But... Kita-chan's folks, Ryo's folks, even your family Bocchi-chan. Reminds me that I don't really have one.”

Nijika looked down. “Mom's... gone. And I have no idea where Dad is. Sis won't tell me, though that probably is for the best. Sis really is all I've got.”

She glanced at the drinks. “I've tried to distract myself by doing anything but actually celebrating. Y'know, push past being tired to stop thinking about these things. Guess it hasn't really worked.”

“W-what do you mean you don't h-have a family?” Hitori asked. “... You've g-got me... a-a-and Ryo-chan, and Kita-chan!”

Hitori slithered her hand to Nijika's shoulder, giving it micro-pats. “It m-might not be the same as having a f-family like mine, b-but it's a

family nonetheless. A-and, you're always welcome in o-our home, Nijika-chan! I-I'm sure Jimihen misses you! B-Besides, you still have your sister, r-right?"

Nijika gave a tired smile, side-hugging the guitarist as Hitori squeaked. "Right, thanks Bocchi-chan. Funny, Kita-chan told me something similar."

"A-all the more makes us right!" Hitori squirmed.

"Hehe, yeah. And sorry for being childish. It really does me no favours, especially since I'm supposed to be the leader."

"I-it's ok, you can be my ch-child!"

"S-say that again, Bocchi-chan?"

"A-ah, I meant y-you can act as my ch-child. I mean, as a c-child! Like, childish. Because th-that's ok with me! Yup! No p-problems with me! A-and I'm sure Ryo-chan d-doesn't mind and Kita-chan f-finds it cute and..." Hitori babbled, slowly losing her solid state as she melted on the spot.

A quick Hitori patch-up and a drink break, Nijika told Hitori to hand out the drinks to her family while the blonde joins up with her sister.

"She's practically dying inside, look at her!" Nijika chuckled as she pointed to Seika, who was already spacing out for the second time - yes, Nijika counted.

Festivities continued as everyone settled in. Futari got tired as she waddled back to her mother to take a nap; meanwhile, Kita ogled more at Nijicat, while Sasaki was roped into taking pictures of the cat. The redhead even managed to get everyone to wear Christmas hats; she wouldn't answer why she had about twenty of them in her bag, and she still wouldn't answer Nijika when she brought up the bag's mysterious size. The fathers and mothers were still in their own

groups, eating the food that finally arrived, but now Hiroi and PA-san were in the mothers group. Seika managed to snake her way out of the table, opting to stare at the fishes.

“J-just making sure this isn’t spilling. Would be horrible to clean up.” Seika said when Nijika raised her eyebrow at her sister.

Somehow, Hiroi got a moment to speak about herself, where as she went on with her biography, each mother grew more and more concerned. The same happened when surprisingly PA-san got to speak about herself.

“Oh, you poor things.” Hitori’s mother hugged the two adults. “You are always welcome at the Gotoh household!”

“Th-thanks?” / “How sweet, Gotoh-san!”

My life isn’t that depressing. / A chance to not eat cup noodles!

“Same with us. I’m sure Ryo would like to talk more with you, Hiroi-san.” Ryo’s mother added. “You’re a real inspiration to her~”

“Ryo-chan does pop by Folt from time to time. I’ll be sure to take up on your offer!” Hiroi exclaimed, taking a swig of her ‘totally-not-alcoholic’ drink. Nobody has noticed yet, though both Ijichis kept giving her serious side-eyes whenever they would pass by.

Kita’s mother sighed. “As long as you aren’t too drunk and if you have absolutely nowhere to go... our place is welcome.”

“Oh, really? Thought you wouldn’t want me anywhere near your place, haha!”

“In emergencies only, Hiroi-san.”

“A-ah, yes.”

Nijika, alongside Hitori, Kita and Sasaki, popped beside Hiroi. “Hi! Sorry to break into your conversation, but could we borrow Hiroi-san

real quick?”

“Sure, sure! She’s such a lovely person to talk to!” Hitori’s mother said.

“Aww, shucks. Thanks Miss Gotoh!” Hiroi bashfully rubbed her neck.

“No, Mom. We aren’t going to be drinking.” Kita butted in when she found her mother to be giving her a look.

“Good.” / “Aw... I-uhh, mean. Good. Yeah. Good.”

Everyone turned to Hiroi.

“G-g-goodbye now!’ Hitori yinked Hiroi and dashed into the studio, with the rest of the small group trailing behind.

Closing the studio door, Nijika turned to the girls and Hiroi. “Alright. We’ve got quite the audience today, so let’s make sure the Christmas program goes smoothly!”

“Ooh, Christmas activities!” Kita squealed. “What do you have planned?”

“Sh... should I be here?” Sasaki asked. “I can do an impromptu dance number, if you guys want. Not wearing the right clothing, but I can make it work.”

“You aren’t performing, Sattsu. Oh, but you could in the future!”

“That’d be cool. If the manager would allow it.”

“I’m sure Sis wouldn’t mind.” Nijika stated. “But that’s beside the point. Christmas program!”

“W-why am I here?” Hiroi asked, pointing at herself. “I don’t have the rest of my crew to perform.”

“I’ll get to that.” Nijika pulled out a whiteboard, with an empty list.

She started to scribble on the board. "First, we'll start with... **sigh**, me and Ryo's performance."

Sasaki snickered. "Looking forward to it."

"Oh, I'm sure it's gonna be great!" Kita beamed.

"Y-yeah!" Hitori agreed.

"Hahaha, d-don't put your hopes up too much." Nijika muttered. "Or at all - ehem. Anyways, Afterwards, we can do a plethora of other things. Definitely gift giving for us Kessoku Band peeps."

Nijika paused her scribbles. "Kita-chan, Bocchi-chan. You two did bring gifts, right?"

"Of course, it's right here in my-"

"Yeah, yeah. In your bag." Nijika interrupted, mumbling, "How does that fit in there..."

"I-it's with my parents, s-since some of the gifts were p-pretty big..." Hitori said.

"Great! Theeeeeeeen..." Nijika encircled the final point in the list. "The big surprise. You two know what I'm talking about."

"Ah, that!" / "Ah, y-yes."

The two guitarists perked up immediately.

"And as for our bassist problem..." Nijika pulled out some sheet music. "Hiroi-san, mind playing for us?"

"Sure! I knew bringing my trusty ol' bass today was for somethin'!" Hiroi accepted Nijika's request.

"Wait, but don't you guys already have Ryo-san?" Sasaki asked.

“It’s a surprise for Ryo. Don’t tell her.” Nijika handed over the papers to Hiroi. “Here’s the notes for the bass parts, feel free to use this room to practise. You can ask Sis to help set things up as I’m sure she’d want an excuse not to be in the party. Be as loud as you want in here!”

Hiroi skimmed through the papers. “Hmmm, I dunno... this looks kinda unfamiliar to me. If I had more time, I could probably-”

“You can drink to your heart's content here.”

“You had me at drink, little Seika! You’re the best!” Hiroi ruffled Nijika’s hair. “Alright, gimme an hour or two and I should have this down!”

“Thanks...” Nijika straightened her hair. “As for the MC tonight... Kita-chan, you ok with-”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Kita shone, blinding everyone in the room. “I’ll gladly lead tonight’s celebration. Hehe~”

Nijika rubbed her eyes. “N-nice. So, any questions?”

Sasaki was the first to shake her head. Then, Kita and Hiroi after a while. Hitori was left, who gave Nijika a concerned look.

“Don’t worry, Bocchi-chan.” Nijika reassured. “I’ll take some rest when I’m not performing. Promise.”

Hitori shot a small smile as she shook her head.

“Great! Meeting dismissed!” Nijika announced, giving a small clap. “Ah, hehe. Sorry. Habit.”

The girls began to shuffle out of the room. Everyone except Hiroi.

“Hiroi-san?” Nijika turned to the bassist, who was setting up the papers on a stand. “At least enjoy the party for a while?”

“Nah. I meant it when I said ‘gimme an hour or two’, little Seika.” Hiroi pulled out her bass. “This must be pretty special for your blue bassist, huh?”

Nijika smiled. “Yeah. We meant to play this for her birthday, but we weren’t able to nail the song down. Been looking for an opportunity to play this for her ever since, and today seemed to be perfect.”

“I’m sure she’ll be over the moon when she hears it!” Hiroi shone her chompers. “Oh, and send Seika over here. With some cables. Oh, and food!”

“Sure you don’t need drinks?” Nijika asked. “Wasn’t kidding when you said you can drink here.”

“Oh, I always come prepared.” Hiroi pulled out a sake box from her bass case. “Don’t underestimate Hiroi Kikuri!”

“Oh... great. Might want to hide all that when Sis gets here.”

“Will do, little Seika!” Hiroi poked a straw through a sake box. “Now go enjoy yourself. I’ve got some work to do.”

Nijika nodded, leaving the bassist to practise in the studio. She felt a little bad leaving her away from the celebrations, but Hiroi’s persistence convinced her that she would be fine. She went over to tell Seika to setup the studio room.

“You *what* ?” Seika almost screeched. “You do realise what she’s capable of *with* alcohol, right?”

“That’s why I need you in there to make sure she doesn’t destroy anything.” Nijika reassured. “I’m sure you don’t want to be here, riiiiight~”

“W-what do you mean? I’m enjoying myself out here.”

“Yeah, staring at the fish. Riveting stuff.”

Seika made a noise of frustration. "Fine. You girls will be ok handling things here?"

"Yup! Kita-chan will be MCing instead of me." Nijika nodded. "We got this."

"Alright then. I'm still unsure about leaving you guys with just PA-san."

"Siiiiiiis."

"I'm going, I'm going."

With that sorted, Nijika joined the others. She allowed herself to enjoy the party: talking a lot with Kita's mother about the band, enjoying some good food with Ryo, then listening to her talk about the genius behind pizza, to which Nijika tuned out mostly.

"... it is strange how pizza isn't considered as healthy food. It really should be." Ryo's voice came back, "Are you even listening, Nijika?"

"Y... yeah." Nijika hummed. "Pizza. Yummy. Healthy."

"Nijikaaaaaaaaa..."

"D-don't shake me!"

"L-look." Hitori pointed on-stage. "Kita-chan's gonna s-start."

Kita poked the microphone on the stage, waving over to PA-san upon finding it off. A solid minute of frantic waving later, the microphone was ready to be used.

"Hello? Can you guys hear me?" Kita spoke into the mic. A few nods and thumbs up. "Great!"

Kita cleared her throat. "Good evening everyone, and Merry Christmas! I'm Kita, and tonight we have some activities and performances planned. Hopefully you all are as hyped as I am!"

That got some cheers and hollers.

“Good to hear everyone! To start, we’ll have a two-person performance from Ryo-chan and Nijika-chan!”

Nijika gestured towards Kita, grabbing the redhead’s attention.

“Ah, actually. Please give our performers a few minutes to get ready. Nijika-chan just came from a nightly jog with me, so she’ll need time to rest. Hope you guys understand!”

Kita bowed and hopped off stage, as PA-san played some Christmas music. The redhead rejoined her group.

“How’d I do?” Kita asked.

“Perfect. Thanks again.” Nijika thanked. “Hoo... performing, yeah.”

“N-nervous?” Hitori asked.

“K... kinda? Well, it’s more on what our actual performance is...”
Nijika suddenly became a little more jittery, shaking her hands.

“She’s fine. She just needs a pep talk from our coach.” Ryo gave her signature thumbs up, placing her hand on Nijika’s shoulder. “In fact, we should go and get ready. C’mom Nijika.”

“S-s-so soon? Hahaha, w-we have time! I’m still pretty tired from my-”

“That’s why you need words of encouragement from Sasaki-san. To remind you of what you’ve practised.” Ryo was halfway pushing Nijika towards the stage, giving the guitarists a wave.

“Bye Ryo-chan, bye Nijika-chan!” Kita waved back.

“B-break a leg!” Hitori cheered, which elicited a confused look from Kita. “I-it’s an expression, Kita-chan.”

“From Nijika-chan?”

“M-mhmm. Y-you thought I meant it?”

“No? M-maybe...”

Back to the performing pair, where the bluehead was almost shoving a blonde corpse towards Sasaki, who already moved beside the stage.

“Yo. You two... uhh, is Nijika-san alright?” Sasaki pointed at the decrepit body leaning on Ryo.

“Yeah. She’s good.” Ryo hummed.

“I’m gonna be a banana in front of everyone, I’m gonna be a banana in front of everyone, I’m gonna be a banana in front of everyone...” Nijika chanted, sanity slipping from the mere thought of unironically wearing a banana costume in front of an actual audience to do an actual performance.

In hindsight, she should’ve never agreed to this.

“Alright, just... remember what we practised. Ryo-san, keep up the energy with your rapping.” Sasaki instructed.

“Roger that.”

“And Nijika-san. You’ve got to snap out of it. Stay cheery up there.”

“Y-you’re not the one who’s a banana!” Nijika snapped.

“Nijika. It’s too late to back down now. Might as well make the most of it and do our best.” Ryo comforted. “And also because it would put my awesome cool totally sick idea to waste.”

“That... does not help!”

“I’ll leave you to sort things out, Ryo-san. You both gotta get dressed.” Sasaki handed over their costumes.

“Thanks. C’mon Nijika, I’ll give you all the headpats you want after we get dressed...” Ryo cooed to the blonde.

“... I better get plenty for this...” Nijika mumbled, as she let herself get dragged into the nearby bathroom.

A quick change of clothes and a plethora of affirmations and headpats later, the performing pair were ready. They stood behind the curtains, where Ryo peeped through to give the go-signal to Kita. The redhead then quickly hopped back on stage to introduce the pair.

“Thank you all for your patience! Our performers are ready! I’m quite excited since I don’t actually know what they have in store for us. But, speaking from experience, I’m sure it’ll be amazing!” Kita beamed.

Kita looked over to PA-san in her booth, who gave a shaky thumbs up.

“Looks like everything’s ready. Let’s give it up to Yamada Ryo and Ijichi Nijika!”

A wave of applause and cheers exuded from the audience, as the lights and Christmas music dimmed out, bringing focus to the stage.

The first thing to appear was Nijika, in all of her banana-styled glory. She held two maracas in each hand, and though she was smiling, anyone with a closer look could tell she was slowly dwindling inside.

Sasaki nearly sputtered out her drink.

Ryo then came on stage, wearing the most stereotypical rapper outfit imaginable: baggy jeans, an oversized shirt with some indecipherable text on it, loads of golden chains, some shades, and

a backwards cap to top it all off. She strutted in, before stopping just by Nijika.

“Ayo, is that a banana with maracas?” Ryo yelled.

Sasaki was now choking. Seeing it in practice was one thing, but to see it actually being done in a live audience was another.

“Yes, it is I. Nijika Bananaji, the sentient banana.” Nijika monotonically stated. “Why am I doing this...”

“Awww, that’s fire! Actually, there’s this one song I always wanted to do, but couldn’t find a sentient banana to do it with.”

“What are you... I mean, sure! I’d be down!”

“Aight, aight. Hit it!”

Nijika gave a big, bright, dying-on-the-inside smile as she shook her maracas. Ryo grabbed the mic as she sang.

“It’s peanut butter jelly time! Peanut butter jelly time!”

Swanky music that sounded like in the 2000s began to play, where Nijika began to bob left and right, shaking her maracas to the questionable music. Meanwhile, Ryo continued to rap on, circling around Nijika.

“Where she at? Where she at? Where she at?”

“There she go, there she go, there she go!”

“Peanut butter jelly! Peanut butter jelly!”

All the while, Sasaki was belly laughing.

Their performance seemed to drone on much longer than expected, as Ryo kept on going while Nijika continued her little dance.

“What’s going on out... here.” Seika opened the studio door to find her sister onstage, wearing a banana costume and dancing to some strange music. The two managed to lock eyes with each other, where Seika could see the strained look in Nijika’s eyes.

Seika turned back to go inside.

“Break it down and freeze! Break it down and freeze!”

“Peanut butter jelly with a baseball bat!”

Eventually, the swanky song ended. Ryo struck a pose, crossing her arms and attempting to share a back-to-back pose with Nijika. Said blonde stood there, somewhat dazed at the fact that she just did that dance. For five minutes. Yes, she kept count.

For a few seconds, the whole livehouse fell into silence. It was only broken by Sasaki’s applause, where the rest of the audience slowly applauded as well.

The Gotohs were somewhat impressed, being only mildly irked considering they had gotten used to Hitori’s shenanigans. Said pinkhead was almost absent, as if she was trying really hard to distance herself from her two bandmates onstage.

“Onee-chan, why is Nijika-chan a banana?” Futari asked.

“I... umm. Don’t know.” Hitori hesitantly replied.

The Yamadas had mixed reactions. While Ryo’s father was also clapping enthusiastically, impressed by her daughter’s rapping skills, Ryo’s mother was still confused on... pretty much everything. Why was the music so weird? Where did Ryo get the idea to do this? Why a banana?

The Kitas were the most disturbed. Kita’s father tried to laugh it off as he awkwardly clapped, but Kita’s mother held a concerned expression. She turned to Kita with a glare.

“I s-swear our performances aren’t this... weird.” Kita protested, though she too was also looking onstage as if she didn’t know the two.

The only person who was genuinely impressed wholeheartedly by the performance was the teacher, Sasaki. The greenhead was still clapping, almost wiping a tear from her eye.

“Beautiful. Such a poetic display of 2000s culture and modern day cringe...” Sasaki said. “B-Brings a tear to my eye...”

With a bow, the two performers got off stage. Nijika immediately scrambled to get back into normal clothing when she was stopped by Kita.

“What... was that?” Kita asked with a raised eyebrow.

Nijika immediately latched onto the redhead, shaky and frail.

“No more, no more, please. I don’t wanna be a banana anymore...” Nijika repeated. Kita stroked the poor blonde’s back as she caught Ryo in her gaze.

Ryo gulped, scurrying off to change.

I think I’ve got time to write my will while I change.

“Umm...” Sasaki approached Kita. “Is... she okay?”

“She will be. Nijika-chan is strong.” Kita hummed, continuing to comfort the blonde. “Did... you really green light this, Sattsu?”

“Yeeeeeah. Sorry. Thought it was too funny to pass up. It worked out in the end though. Somewhat.”

“At I-least I don’t have to do this again. Hehehe, eheheh...” Nijika chuckled dryly.

“Nijika-chan? A-are you ok?” Hitori came by. “Y-you were really... cool? Yeah, doing... umm, whatever th-that was.”

“Thanks Bocchi-chan. I’ll be fine.” Nijika smiled. “Though, I do want to get out of this ASAP.”

“You do look somewhat nice in that, if I’m honest.” Kita commented, who was met with a disappointed gaze. “What?”

Now in her usual clothing, Ryo shuffled towards the group. “So, I know I might be asking a bit too much, but can my casket be in oak? I think it looks-”

Ryo got cut off when she found Nijika’s fist rammed into her stomach.

“That’s for making me go through all that.” Nijika grunted, ruffling the bluehead’s hair. “And that’s for somehow making it work. Good job Ryo.”

Ryo responded in a fit of coughs.

Nijika stomped off to change, while the rest were left with Ryo cradling on the floor.

Sasaki had a look of concern. “Is... this norma-”

“Yes.” / “Y-yes...”

Nijicat waddled over to lick Ryo’s face. “Th-thanks... Nijicat...”

Kita rolled her eyes. “C’mon Hitori-chan. Help me get her up.”

“R-right!”

The two guitarists propped her up, making sure they didn’t accidentally poke at her stomach.

“Thanks guys...” Ryo coughed. “Kinda deserved that. Still, owwww...”

“Humbled yet?” Kita asked.

“Kita, I just got floored by one punch from a banana. Please.”

“Th-there, there Ryo-chan. I’m s-sure you can still eat food. A-and digest, and stuff...” Hitori attempted to soothe the bluehead.

Ryo snickered. “D-don’t make me laugh, hehehe... st-stomach hurts... pffft...”

“Though, I have to say. Pretty impressive rapping, Ryo-chan.” Kita admitted.

“Yeah, Ryo-san. Make me wonder if you’ve done rapping before.” Sasaki chimed in. “Oh man, I shoulda taught you some techniques. I’d actually be down to teach you and the others rapping.”

“Yay...”

The group returned to the audience, where Ryo’s family was first to greet them.

“Honestly Ryo, I had no idea what I just watched, but I’m impressed!” Ryo’s father laughed. “I-umm, are you ok?”

“She’s fine!” Kita waved off. “A little stomach ache is all. Probably from something she ate.”

“Kita-chan, w-what are y... yes! Yes. Ryo-chan ate s-something bad. Real bad. Mhmm...” Hitori quickly agreed.

“My, Ryo~ You’ve got to be careful with what you eat, dear.” Ryo’s mother said.

“... yes Mom...” Ryo muttered, whispering right after, “... why in front of my friends...”

Returning Ryo back to her family, the trio waited for Nijika to finish changing.

“Hey guys.” Nijika greeted, now in normal clothing. “Is Ryo ok?”

“Yup. She’s with her fam.” Sasaki gestured behind her.

“Oh, good. Didn’t want to break a rib or something, ehehe.”

“Y-you’re kidding when you say that, right? Right?”

Hitori shuddered.

Never get on her bad side. Ever.

“They’re close, Sattsu. Trust me.” Kita said.

“You’re close with me and Gotoh-san. You don’t sucker punch us.”

“W-well, yeah! I’d never!”

Hitori shuddered again.

The night continued, as Kita went back onstage to announce the next activities. Nijicat sat squarely on Ryo’s lap, who was holding onto the feline like it was her lifeline.

Sasaki had to repeatedly say no to Kita’s requests to take some sneaky photos of the two.

Hiroi and Seika were able to join the others for the rest of the night, huddling around PA-san’s booth. When Nijika came over to ask about Hiroi’s progress, the blonde was disappointed to find the bassist’s speech a bit slurred.

“Wazzn’t that hard, believe it or not little Seika!” Hiroi explained. “Got done with it after, like, an hour? The drinks definitely helped, hahahaha!”

“They don’t help with your stench, Hiroi.” Seika stated. “But it’s true Niji. She even found the song online to listen to. Gotta say, sounds

something up your band's avenue."

"Give me more credit, Seika! I killed it!"

"Ugh, I'll keep a short leash on her. In case she goes crazy or something. She'll be ready when you guys perform."

"Thanks Sis!"

"Guys, I can't see Kita-san..." PA-san mumbled. "Oh, she's onstage!"

"Hi guys! I'm sure you're enjoying tonight as much as I am! Up next... ehehe, actually. We really don't have much planned tonight. So... would you all like to hear a little bit of Kessoku Band?"

With a resounding response of cheers, Kita called up her band members... to help set up the instruments.

"Why must you torture me, Kita?" Ryo groaned, intentionally letting her arms droop after she placed her bass on a guitar stand. "My stomach..."

"Oh, don't be such a baby Ryo." Nijika positioned the snare drum so that it fitted her.

A few more adjustments and audio tests, Kessoku Band was ready to play.

The band played some of their fan-favourites, considering they were the songs the girls were most familiar with. The parents of each band member enjoyed each song, proud to see their daughters playing and having fun.

"Hey, lemme join in the fun too!" Hiroi shouted, scrambling to get onstage.

"Hiroi, calm down!" Seika came after Hiroi.

Eventually, the stage occupied a weird mix of musicians. Hiroi stole Ryo's place as bassist, while Hitori's father suggested that he'd try on guitar.

"Y-you'll be on lead g-guitar though. Sure Dad?" Hitori asked.

"I'll have to shake off the cobwebs, but I'll be mostly fine." Hitori's dad responded.

Hitori was not convinced in the slightest.

Seika managed to find a spare keyboard in the storage room for Ryo's mother to play on, joining the ensemble. And, with enough jeering from Nijika, who was on drums, the older blonde got on rhythm guitar.

"Don't expect anything great. Haven't played in who knows how long." Seika grumbled. "Geez, were the stage lights always this bright..."

"Sis, if the parents can stand onstage, then so can you." Nijika snarked. That got her to shut up.

Deciding on what to actually play was tough. They didn't really have a common song that they all knew how to play. So, they decided to play a Kessoku Band original, seeing as everyone was mostly familiar with their songs.

From the get go, things were off. Though Nijika and Hiroi kept in tune and on time, the rest weren't so favourable. Both Seika's and Hitori's father's playing were out of sync, and Ryo's mother played a few wrong notes - if anyone could hear her playing, from all of the other instruments playing. Nevertheless, it didn't stop the high spirits everyone was in, as Kita elected herself to sing along onstage. The crowd also sang along as smiles were shared around the livehouse. It truly was a good time.

"Man..." Seika huffed. "We were horrible."

“I had fun, Ijichi-san.” Hitori’s father said. “That’s what matters.”

“Yeah. You’re not too bad yourself, Gotoh-san.”

“I should really learn how to play along with your songs, Nijika-san.” Ryo’s mother said.

“Oh? I can ask Ryo to write up some piano parts for our older songs, if you want Miss Yamada.” Nijika suggested.

“That would be splendid!”

Hiroi sobbed. “You guys are the bessht... why can’t I have something like this with Shima and Eliza and everyone in Foooolt... huhuhu...”

Seika had to console the bassist, bringing her back to PA-san’s corner.

The program went on as Kita announced that it would be time for gift giving.

“Uhh, I don’t think the others brought gifts.” Sasaki noted as Kita hopped offstage.

“It’s fine Sattsu. Originally, it was just going to be Kessoku Band only. But since more people are here, might as well give the gifts you want to give now!” Kita exclaimed.

“Very into the Christmas spirit, I see.”

“You betcha! Anyone who has gifts to give, come!”

And so, Seika, Hiroi, Sasaki and Kessoku Band huddled around one big table.

“Hiroi? You have a gift to give?” Seika raised her suspicion.

“What Seikaaa? Think little ol’ me couldn’t get a gift? How thoughtless of you, senpai~” Hiroi said.

“Alright! Now that we’re all here, who’s going first?” Kita hummed.

“Guess I should get mine out of the way.” Sasaki stood up to hand Kita a piece of paper. “Merry Christmas, Kita.”

Kita squinted at the writing on the paper. “‘Free funny pass’, are you saying I’m not funny?”

Sasaki snickered. “M-maybe.”

Kita grumbled and pouted.

“Relax. I didn’t bring your gift tonight. I’ll give it to you tomorrow or something.” Sasaki reassured. “Though, I think you’ll find more value with that pass. Means that I have to laugh at whatever you say.”

“The power of laughter shouldn’t be scoffed at, Kita.” Ryo added.

Kita face-planted on the table.

“Welp, since she’s done, might as well do mine next.” Hiroi pulled out a small photo, handing it over to Seika. “Merry Christmas, Seika.”

“Let me guess, you got me a-”

Seika paused.

“This is... this is...”

“Yep. Your after-party photo, after you graduated from high school. Don’t know how it ended up on my end, but wanted to give it to ya.”

“My old band...” Seika traced her hand over her former band members.

Hiroi looked over. “Heh, I looked so young back-ack!”

She couldn't finish her sentence as she got squeezed by Seika's arms.

"Thank you, Hiroi." Seika said.

"Y-you're welcome... ack! My arms... breaking..." Hiroi squirmed in Seika's grasp.

"W-what's with you and your s-sister and being so, umm, r-rough?" Hitori asked Nijika.

"Eh, probably runs in the family." Nijika shrugged.

After freeing Hiroi from her grasp (poor bassist had to deflate on a nearby chair), Seika stood up to give her gift.

"M-money? Really?" / "Th-thank you, Manager..." / "Thanks, Manager!" / "Thank you for your blessing. I am forever in your debt, Manager. With this, I will be able to-"

Kita bopped Ryo.

"Yeah, didn't really have time to find a good gift for you all, so I thought money would suffice. Sorry." Seika said.

"Nonsense Manager. For what you have given is the best gift I could ever receive. It truly is a Christmas-"

Kita bopped Ryo again.

"I'll go next!" Kita announced, pushing across the table three small boxes to her bandmates.

"Oh? What's this, Kita-chan?" Nijika asked.

"I hope it's more money." Ryo shook her box.

"It's not." Kita immediately shot down.

“Worth a shot.”

“... it’s... an earring?” Hitori held up a black guitar pick earring, with the logo of Kessoku Band printed on it.

“Yep! Thought we could wear it while we play together! See?” Kita showed off her earring on her right ear. “And it doesn’t really stand out much! Perfect for whatever we wear onstage!”

“Woah, it looks really good! It’s way better than the zip ties we wear!” Nijika said.

“Perfect. Better merch to sell too.” Ryo nodded.

“A-ah, I’ve, umm... never had m-my ears pierced...” Hitori mumbled.

“Oh, that’s ok! We can get them pierced! It won’t hurt, I promise!” Kita replied.

“Oh, o-okay... hehehehe, I bet I’d I-look cool, ehehehe...”

With Hitori reduced to a giggling mess, it was Ryo’s turn to give her gifts.

“I’m surprised you got us anything.” Nijika huffed.

“Same. Might be the Christmas spirit or something. I might be... an imposter. Wooh~” Ryo wiggled her fingers.

“Ok, ghost of Christmas scams. What did you get us?”

Ryo handed Nijika a pair of boxing gloves.

“There are healthier ways to release your aggression, Nijika. Ways that don’t include your best friend.” Ryo said.

“You know, weirdly...” Nijika strapped on the boxing gloves. “... I like these. Thanks Ryo! Hehehe, I do need someone to test these on...”

“M-moving on...” Ryo glided over to Hitori, away from Nijika’s sinister giggling and intensifying stare at her.

She laid down a bunch of stationary goods: blinders, folders, notebooks, pens with erasable ink, sticky-notes, bookmarks, highlighters, pencils, and a pencil case.

“It helps to be organised while I make music, so I thought this would help you.” Ryo commented. “Of course, you can also use this for school or whatever.”

“Ryo-chan... th-thank you...” Hitori was brought to tears. “I will cherish these artifacts forever...”

“Y-you have to use them, Bocchi. Not worship them.”

“R-right. I’ll keep them beside my bed, a-always.”

“Wait, so Bocchi-chan gets something practical, but I get boxing gloves?” Nijika complained.

“Nijika. Be grateful.”

“*You* better be grateful that I’m not coming over there to-”

“Calm down, Niji. And please, take off those gloves.” Seika woumped her hand on Nijika’s face.

Ryo went over to Kita, her last person to give gifts to.

“Soooo, what did you get me?” Kita asked expectantly.

“Well...” Ryo pulled out a funky hat. “Here.”

Kita took the hat. “Is this... a lamp on a hat?”

“Yeah. Cool right? You just, pull the thingy on the side and it lights up.”

Kita popped the hat on her head, turning on the lamp on top of her head.

“I can’t tell if you bought this because it looks funny or because it’s practical, but thanks!” Kita thanked Ryo.

“It is kinda funny.” Sasaki commented. “Would help when you study late at night, I guess.”

“Oh, true! But, I already have a lamp at home.”

“Ehh, you can probably think of a matching outfit for that.” Ryo suggested, though internally she was sighing in relief.

Thank goodness I didn’t actually just buy her a lampshade. I might’ve been sent to the hospital tonight. Good job Ryo. Thanks Ryo. Anytime Ryo.

“Holdon! Lemme get mine!” Nijika disappeared into the storage room, reappearing with four circular pillows. She gave one to each bandmate, hugging one for herself.

“It’s Kessoku plushies!” Nijika held up hers, which upon closer look is a very spherical dog in the colour of her hair. “Well, not really. Found these in the Shimokitazawa station one time, and I just had to buy them for you guys!”

“They’re so... round. And fat.” Ryo held up her blue plushie. “I like it. Cute.”

“Awww~” Kita cooed, tightly hugging her red plushie. “It’s so huggable too!”

“Y-yeah. Squishy. Hehehehe...” Hitori poked at her pink plushie.

“Glad you guys like ‘em! Oh, they are to be dry cleaned though. At least once a month. Try not to get them wet. They can be quite fragile! That includes any perfume and the like.” Nijika instructed. “It really damages the fabric, this kind of material is precious.”

“Nijika-chan, they’re plushies. Not pets.” Kita said. “We’ll take care of them good!”

“Yup. See, Nijicat likes Ryo 2.” Ryo pointed to Nijicat, who was licking her plushie.

“Careful with... Ryo 2? Really?” Nijika asked.

“What? Not all of the names I come up with have to be smart or witty.”

“F-Futari! That’s mine!” Hitori yelled. “Give it back!”

“Mom, Dad! Look at how fluffy Nijika-chan’s gift is! Hehehe!” Futari showed off Hitori’s plushie.

“That’s great, Futari dear! M-might want to return it to your older sister...” Hitori’s mother advised, seeing Hitori’s murderous gaze over Futari.

All who was left to give gifts was Hitori, who after wrangling her sister to give her plushie back, scrambled over to her parents. She hauled over her gifts from her family, making sure not to drop any of them.

“F-f-first...” Hitori handed Ryo a blue Walkman, together with a cassette labeled ‘Kessoku Band songs’. “M-Merry Christmas, Ryo-chan...”

“Ain’t that an antique! Where’dya get one, Bocchi-chan?” Hiroi asked.

“S-s-somewhere...”

“This is amazing, Bocchi. Always wanted one of these. Thanks.” Ryo smiled.

“Y-you’re welcome!”

Hitori then plopped a drum pad with a bass drum pad and a pedal for it.

“F-for Nijika-chan. S-so that you can practise at home! Y-you said that it’s hard to practise at h-home and your drum pad s-seemed worn...” Hitori explained.

“Aww, thanks Bocchi-chan!” Nijika gave a quick hug to Hitori.

“Hehehehehe, ehehehehehe-”

“Not now, Bocchi-chan.”

“R-right.”

Hitori moved over to Kita, who had been expectantly waiting for her gift.

“F-finally, Kita-chan... here.” Hitori handed the redhead an instant camera. “M-might be a bit old school, but you d-do like to take photos.”

Kita gasped in awe. “This is... so sweet of you Hitori-chan! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Oh my gosh, I just thought of this - think of all of the scrapbooks I can fill up with all of our memories!” Kita tightly embraced the pinkhead. She even managed to lift the pinkhead, enough to turn Hitori’s irises into swirls.

“Ack! N-no problem, Kita-chan...” Hitori choked.

“And she complains I’m a bit rough.” Nijika nudged to Ryo.

“You are though.” Ryo responded.

“Oh! We *gotta* take one photo now! With you in it!” Kita pulled over Hitori, readying the camera for a selfie.

“W-w-wait, I’m not-”

snap

“Hitori-chaaaaaan, you have to keep your eyes open for the camera! Now we have to take another photo!”

“Ughh...”

The rest of the table watched as both guitarists took a dozen more photos. Kita then nodded to herself, with a photo of the both of them in hand (it was the only one where Hitori was looking mostly alive).

“Good enough!” Kita slipped the photo into her pocket. “I’ll be sure to update you guys on my scrapbooks. Oooh, I’m excited!”

“... y-yeah, whoooo...” Hitori weakly cheered, with Sasaki helping the pinkhead to her seat. “Thanks Sa-sasa-sa-san.”

“Anytime. Hey, you’re getting better at saying my name.” Sasaki winked.

“Awawawawawa-th-thhhh-thanks?”

Sasaki snorted.

“So, you’ll take a dozen photos with Gotoh-san, but not with me?” Sasaki smirked.

“Oh, c’mere Sattsu. If you want to have a photo with me so bad, then smile for the camera!” Kita roped Sasaki in.

With everyone settled down and each band member showing their gifts to their parents, the party seemed to be coming to a close.

“Man, it’s late. Might want to close up soon.” Seika said. “Someone’s got to pack up this pool, and I know a certain *someone* isn’t.”

“Well, Sis. We still have that surprise for that certain someone.” Nijika said back.

“Oh, right. You guys should get set up.”

Nijika nodded, running off to call on Hitori and Kita.

“We’re playing again?” Ryo stopped Nijika in her tracks.

“Not you. We have Hiroi-san on bass. You’ll see~” Nijika winked as she dashed over to Hiroi.

“Huh. Wonder what they have planned.”

Kita, Nijika, Hitori and Hiroi made their way onstage, going through their audio tests and last-minute tuning.

“Hi everyone! To close the night, we’ll be playing one last song!” Kita announced. “I think I’ll let Nijika-chan do the talking.”

“Thanks Kita-chan.” Nijika inched closer to her mic. “Hey everyone. Glad everyone’s having fun. Originally, this song was supposed to be played on Ryo’s birthday. Guess things got into the way and we never had the chance... until now. So, uhh, happy birthday Ryo? Sounds weird saying it-ehem, anyways. Hope you like this, Ryo.”

The crowd gave a cheer as Ryo settled in her seat, with a comfy Nijicat snoozing in her lap and Ryo 2 by her side. Ryo raised an eyebrow at Nijika, who rolled her eyes in response.

Nijika nodded to Hiroi, who nodded to Hitori, who nodded to Kita. They were ready.

Nijika led them in with her drumsticks, and Ryo instantly knew what they were going to play from the roar of Hitori’s guitar. A consistent, yet lone strumming.

Wait... this is...

She was then joined by Kita’s strumming, played in a higher pitch than Hitori.

The frantic drums from Nijika kicked in, accompanied with the steady footsteps of Hiroi's bass.

Ryo watched how Nijika's arms turned into a flurry of movement, as she glided across the different drums. She saw how Hiroi kept up with the rush of Nijika, even smiling despite playing something much more simple compared to what she usually plays. She saw Hitori, who now was looking up a lot more, actually glance at her other members. She saw Kita, smiling as bright as ever, before she sang.

'This is my escape, I'm running through this world and I'm not looking back!'

'Cause I know I can go, where no one's ever gone and I'm not looking back!'

Ryo's ears tickled as Hitori responded to each line with her own riff.

'But how will I know when I get there?'

'And how will I know when to leave?'

She didn't even realise that Kita was singing in English. A bit off with some pronunciation, but it didn't matter to Ryo.

'We've all gotta start from somewhere, and it's right there for me!'

'The possibilities are never-ending!'

Ryo grew goosebumps as she awaited the chorus.

'I see it, I see it, and now it's all within my reach!'

'Endless possibility!'

'I see it, I see it now; it's always been inside of me.'

'And now I feel so free, endless possibility!'

She saw Nijika's arms turn back to noodles as she pulled off drum fill after drum fill. She saw the sweat glisten as Nijika turned her head from left to right. Ryo could tell she was putting her all in this one song, more than she usually does.

'And so I'll carry on; my time to shine has come,'

'I feel it!'

Ryo loved the subtle change to the drums playing during the second verse, and smiled when Nijika did it with ease.

'As fast as I can go, straight to the top I know,'

'You'll see it!'

Again, Hitori's responses sat comfortably in Ryo's ears as she giggled at how childish the words were.

'So please wake me up when I get there.'

'It feels like I'm lost in a dream.'

'I know in my heart that it's my time, and I already see!'

'The possibilities are never-ending!'

Oh, what the heck. I'll join them.

"I see it, I see it, and now it's all within my reach!"

"Endless possibility!"

"I see it, I see it now; it's always been inside of me."

"And now I feel so free, endless possibility!"

The guitars grew heavier and more sinister, as Hiroi's playing grew just a slight more frantic. Ryo laughed when she heard Nijika rap the

next lines.

'Drop that smile, 'cause you're beaten again.'

'No, this is where my journey begins!'

She was impressed with how Nijika continued her flow while rapping the cheesiest lines ever to exist on Earth. Ryo was still laughing.

'You're losin' speed, you're losin' your flow,'

'But inside me is a power you'll never know.'

'Then let it out; it's inside you!'

'Better all stand back, 'cause I'm coming through!'

Nijika filled in for Hitori to play her guitar solo, a Kessoku Band staple at this point. With each note Hitori played, Ryo followed with her head. Exactly just like the song.

'I see it, I see it, and now it's all within my reach... '

'I see it, I see it now; it's always been inside of me... '

Now Hiroi and Nijika joined in as backing vocals for Kita. Ryo's smile hasn't left her face.

"I see it, I see it, and now it's all within my reach!"

"Endless possibility!"

"I see it, I see it now; it's always been inside of me."

"And now I feel so free, endless possibility!"

Ryo hasn't even noticed that she's been bobbing her head to the music, almost like an owl.

'Endless possibility!'

The song ends with how it started as Hitori's final notes echoed across the livehouse.

And the livehouse erupted in applause.

"Thank you all so much! That was *Endless Possibility*, the credits song in Ryo's favourite video game *Sonic Unleashed*!" Nijika shouted, breathy and clearly tired. "To give a bit of backstory, this was probably one of the hardest songs to play! Especially without Ryo's help, which..."

Ryo tuned out Nijika's ongoing speech, the fountain of applause and whistles. She only heard her breath and her breath alone.

In and out.

She adored the song - probably was in her top 10 songs to ever be made. The high-octane and electrifying rhythm, the hard and dominant guitars, yet the feeling of gliding on water or surfing across the wind. It was fast. It was refreshing. It was liberating.

She adored the song. Ever since she was a kid, when she first beat the game, she was in awe. She would admit that this was one of the songs that got her into playing rock, though she would never say this to anyone. Not even Nijika. It was a little bit embarrassing to admit it. Maybe one day she would tell her.

She adored the song. The amount of times she's replayed this song was unhealthy. The invigorating rush she got with each replay, never getting enough of it. She felt that it embodied everything that she was, and everything that she wanted to be. Wanting to do her own thing, her own way, with her own rules. In true freedom. And sounding as sick as she can ever be too.

She didn't like Sonic because he was blue. She loved Sonic for how cool he is.

She loved being cool.

And that's why she adored the song.

Ryo touched her face to find it still moist. She must've been crying since the song began. Her throat aches too. She probably looked absolutely horrible right now. And she was right in front of...

"So, hope you enjoyed that Ryo. R-Ryo?!?" Nijika squawked as Ryo turned away, running off to leave Starry.

The door slammed shut, stunning everyone inside in silence.

Nijika sighed. "Guys, help clean up back here. I'll get Ryo."

"Y-you sure?" Hitori asked. "You look t-tired."

"Yeah, Nijika-chan. Maybe another time?" Kita said.

"Nah. Let her go guys." Hiroi conjured another sake box. "Those two have a sacred bond. Little Seika's got this."

"Thanks Hiroi-san." Nijika smiled. "D-don't drink too much while I'm not here."

"Whaddidya say?" Hiroi poked her straw into her second sake box.

Nijika grumbled, hopping offstage to run after Ryo. She was stopped by Ryo's father.

"S-sir?" Nijika addressed.

"We... know you two are close. It'd be awkward for me to talk with her." Ryo's father admitted. "Go get her."

"We know you'll do fine talking with our Ryo!" Ryo's mother added.

"Thank you, both." Nijika bowed to the both, before heading to the stairwell.

“Niji! At least wipe yourself off!” Seika stopped the young blonde, shoving in her face some towels. “A-and put on a coat! It’s freezing out there.”

“Thanks Sis. You’ve got things handled here?” Nijika zipped up her coat from the coat rack.

“Of course. Even Ryo’s weird... pool. Ughh, it’s gonna take me forever...”

“Better get started~”

Nijika swiftly left the livehouse, as her bandmates cheered her on.

“Get our bassist back!” / “W-we’ll make sure everything here is c-clean!”

Nijika was greeted with the sting of the winter breeze. Her cheeks were kissed with cold air, as she tried to duck her head deeper in her coat. With each step she took up the stairs, she felt her energy slipping away. The performance took more out of her than expected, and she knew that she might collapse at any time.

But Nijika pushed through. Her best friend needed her.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Nijika swivelled her head around. She thought of yelling her name when she spotted the bluehead, underneath a nearby lamppost. Alone.

Well, that didn’t surprise Nijika. Not one bit.

She couldn’t see the bassist’s face, as she stood there. Her scarf flowed freely from the wind, and her hands were tucked snugly in her coat’s pockets. She made little motion, being lightly swayed from the frosty winds. On any normal day, Nijika would leave her alone. She knew the loner loved her alone time, and even if the blonde wanted to meet with her on some days, she would be content

whenever said loner said 'no' to watch some anime or brainstorm some new ideas for possible songs.

Nijika couldn't now. Not when she heard the quiet sniffs of Ryo.

She waddled over to Ryo, the accumulating snow softening her loafing footsteps.

"Hey, blueberry pie." Nijika hummed, now standing beside Ryo. "It's pretty cold out here, huh."

No response.

Nijika sighed, her breath becoming visible in the chilly air. "It's just me, you goof. You can stop trying to hide yourself."

Again, no response.

"Please, Ryo."

Eventually, the bassist craned her head to face Nijika.

"H-hi..." Ryo croaked.

"There you-" Nijika paused, seeing the state of Ryo's face. "Ughh, at least wipe off your... here, lemme do it."

She pulled out her handkerchief, wiping off all the stained tears and nose juice on Ryo's face. She noticed Ryo's blush, deepening into a more vibrant red when Nijika finished cleaning up Ryo.

"... thanks..." Ryo muttered, trying so hard to hide in her scarf.

"You can... keep my handkerchief." Nijika handed over the piece of cloth. "Seeing as it's covered in your yucky stuff."

"I-it's not that yucky." Ryo pocketed it. "Might sell for a lot."

"Eww! Gross!"

Ryo chuckled, a little more deep with all of the mucus in her throat.

The two stood still, feeling the brisk breeze greet them from time to time. Nijika began to shiver, too tired to fight off the cold.

She almost sighed with relief when she felt the warmth of Ryo from her left side. Nijika was glad Ryo was able to afford such winter clothing, almost jealous that she gets to wear that and Nijika's stuck with her sister's hand-me-down clothes. Not that they were-

Wait. Ryo's... hugging me?

Nijika looked to her left, indeed finding the bassist giving her a hug. A little awkward with the height difference (and the fact that Ryo has no idea how to hug people without being hugged first), but a hug nonetheless.

"... thanks..." Ryo said again, her face covered in red.

Ryo's kinda cute like this.

"Hey now..." Nijika laid her hand on Ryo's arms. "You don't have to hug me if you don't want to."

"... but... I do..." Ryo mumbled. "Mmm, you're... making me say that out loud on purpose."

"What, no! I'd never!"

"Meanie."

"You're the one being mean! To me!"

"Still makes you a meanie."

"Ugh, Ryo!"

Nijika grumbled as Ryo continued to hug her.

“Feeling better?” Nijika asked.

“Yeah. Yeah I am.” Ryo replied.

A pause.

“It’s ok to feel.” Nijika said. “It’s normal to have tears of joy. Doesn’t make you weak or pathetic.”

“... I know. It’s just...”

“Embarrassing?”

Ryo hummed.

“I kinda envy Bocchi.” Ryo admitted. “She does her thing and though she does get embarrassed, she’s able to move on. And Kita. She wears her heart on her sleeve. I envy that too. But here I am reduced to a crying mess when I feel more... honest.”

Nijika detached Ryo’s arms from her to get a look at Ryo. Her yellow eyes were surrounded with red, and she could see the little droplets in her eyes trying their best not to escape.

“You just have to get used to it, is all.” Nijika smiled. “I mean, Bocchi-chan shape shifts and does all kinds of stuff all the time. And Kita-chan... well, she’s Kita-chan. She’s got the unstoppable force of the Sun!”

Ryo giggled. “Yeah.”

“Though, this is a sight for sore eyes. Eventually, all of your snarky and monotone jokes get tiring.”

“Wha-hey. Rude. Meanie.”

“Says you!”

The two kerfuffled a little, ending with Nijika's head being pushed into her coat by Ryo.

"Thanks, Nijika. Really." Ryo smiled, a little wider than her usual grins. "That performance was amazing."

"Glad you liked it." Nijika smiled back.

"Hey, look. You can see the stars out here."

Nijika looked up into the black expanse, her eyes widening upon seeing all of the stars that came out to play in the great night sky.

"Woah! You're right! Never seen this many!" Nijika sparkled.

"Must be because I'm out here." Ryo stated.

"Of course you'd say that."

The two fell into silence again, admiring the starry sky above. The whistling of the wind sang into the night, as they stood. Ryo's sniffing has finally stopped, replaced with soft breathing.

Nijika decided to break the silence.

'I'm gonna reach for the stars... '

"Nijika, really?" Ryo snickered. "You're horribly out of tune."

'Although they look pretty far.'

Ryo rolled her eyes as she joined in with Nijika's singing.

'I'm gonna find my own way.'

'And take a chance on today!'

The two sang, with Ryo trying her best to compliment Nijika's singing whilst battling her throat. Nothing but the stars bore witness to the

little karaoke but the bassist and drummer duo.

'A sky with stars so bright,'

'The colours feel so right!'

'I've never felt like this,'

'I'll keep on running!'

'A sky with stars so bright,'

'The colours feel so right!'

'Just take my hand we're gonna reach for the stars,'

'Tonight.'

'Tonight.'

The two ended their mini-duet, evident from Ryo's coughing fit right after. Nijika patted Ryo's back to soothe her.

"Thanks. **cough**, who knew singing with lung juice in your lungs sucks." Ryo cleared her throat.

"One, don't call it lung juice. Two, duh." Nijika deadpanned.

"And you call me the meanie..."

"Don't act like that, now!"

A pause.

"You know, out of all of the Sonic songs you subjected me to listen to, that one was always my favourite." Nijika said. "Not hard to guess why."

“Reach for the Stars, in Sonic Colours.” Ryo recalled. “Pretty good song too.”

“Yeah, it is. Maybe we could play it one day. Kita-chan and Bocchi-chan might like it too.”

“That... would be awesome, Nijika.”

Nijika giggled. “Who knew you were such a sap underneath all that coolio bravado?”

Ryo flared up in face-flames. “Y-you’re not helping...”

“Haha, ok, ok. I’ll stop. Can’t help it~”

The two watched the stars. Nijika saw one twinkle. She had a good feeling who that was.

Now it was Ryo’s turn to giggle.

“What’s funny?” Nijika asked. “It’d better not be another-”

“It’s not, it’s not.” Ryo pulled out her phone, “H-here, lemme show you.”

Nijika huddled over to Ryo as the bassist quickly searched up something.

“Nijika-chan? Ryo-chan?” Kita yelled out, finding the two. “Ah, there you both are!”

“H-hi guys...” Hitori greeted after, sneaking her way beside Kita.

“Bocchi, Kita. Get over here. Need to show you something.” Ryo beckoned both of them over. “Nijika, stop leaning on me so hard. You’re heavy.”

“... shut it, bassist. I’m tired.” Nijika mumbled. “Besides, deep down you like me this close.”

Ryo stammered. "... you're not wrong..."

"Oh~" Kita cooed. "Sure I should come over? You two seem lovely-dovely over there~"

"Just get over here, Strawberry Burst." Ryo groaned.

Kita giggled, bringing Hitori with her. The four peered at Ryo's phone, which had a photo of Sonic and three other characters.

"Oh my gosh, not this..." Now it was Nijika's turn to groan.

"Here me out guys. So, you see this orange fox? He's Nijika-"

"He's orange! Not yellow!"

Ryo went on to explain who each of the characters were, relating them to the corresponding band member in colour. Kita, Hitori and Nijika listened to Ryo nerd about Sonic, the redhead intently listening as if she were listening to a lecture. Hitori didn't really follow from the word spaghetti coming out of Ryo's mouth, though she did find the pink hedgehog cute. She nearly melted on the sidewalk when Ryo mentioned that she reminded her of the hedgehog - it was too cold to melt, so she settled on becoming jelly. Nijika, half-listening and half-snuggling on Ryo's coat, was still grumpy that she was being compared with the genius fox, though she couldn't stop smiling as Ryo carried on nerding out.

Cute...

Ryo then went on the gush about the performance, which surprised Kita and Hitori. Kita bashfully waved off her ability to learn lyrics in a new language, Hitori did actually melt on the sidewalk from all of Ryo's praises of the pinkhead's guitar playing, and Nijika nodded along when Ryo expressed her love for her drum playing.

"As expected of you, Nijika." Ryo said, though from Ryo's smile and tone, Nijika knew she really did love her playing.

Ryo did want to thank Hiroi for filling in as their bass player, expressing her slight disappointment that the song didn't have anything expressive for bass players to play. She went on to suggest some ways to add more spice in the bass parts of the song. Nijika chalked this up as another typical Ryo moment, though this time it was a little sweeter than usual.

"And I thought your throat ached a moment ago." Nijika joked.

"Right! I saw her singing along with us while we played! It was adorable!" Kita gushed.

"... d-don't remind me, Kita." Ryo pulled up her scarf.

"I could n-never sing in f-front of a performance. Y-you're really brave, Ryo-chan..." Hitori noted. Ryo hid further into her scarf.

"Bocchi-chan, maybe you want to reconsider what's... brave." Nijika said.

"What are you talking about, I think that's pretty brave for Ryo-chan!" Kita disagreed.

"G-guys..." Ryo squeaked.

The quartet continued to banter, only broken up when Nijika began to snore on Ryo's coat.

"W-whauh!" Nijika jolted up, finding Ryo's hand on her head. "Sorry. I'm pooped."

"Then we should probably help with-"

Ryo gasped.

"My fishes!"

Immediately, Ryo dashed back into Starry, with Nijika falling onto Hitori.

“Nice catch.” Nijika quipped.

“Aaaaaaa, e-ehehehehehe, y-y-yeah!” Hitori sputtered.

“Ryo-chan, Nijicat too!” Kita shouted.

“Oh, right.” Ryo yelled from inside of Starry.

The trio just shook their heads, all with the same thoughts...

Classic Ryo-chan.

Typical Ryo.

Where did Ryo-chan even get her fish? I never asked her. I’m... kind of scared to ask her. Maybe she got them from somewhere sketchy. Ryo-chan definitely knows some fishy websites. Heh, fishy. Hehehehehe...

... mostly with the same thoughts.

Ryo stretched in her pyjamas, ready to hop into bed. It had been a long day for the bassist: finding a spare kiddie pool, decorating Starry, filling the pool with water, meeting with all the other families, finding a spare air pump without her parents knowing (she got a light scolding when they found out), celebrating with her family and friends, somehow finding fish to place in the pool. She placed a lot more logistics in that one pool than she’d like to admit.

Oh, and who could forget the performances?

“Meow!” Nijicat chirped.

“Shhh. Keep it down Nijicat.” Ryo yawned. “You don’t want Mom and Dad finding you here. Though knowing them, it’s not like they’d kick you out...”

Nijicat waddled over to Ryo's bed, taking a solid minute to jump onto it. Ryo gave many headpats when the cat managed to hop on the bed.

"Make peace with Ryo 2 now. She's a prized possession." Ryo warned.

"Mew."

"Good cat."

Ryo was about to plug some earbuds into her new Walkman when she heard her phone vibrate.

Weird. I don't usually get anyone texting me at this hour. Well, except Nijika. And Bocchi. And Kita at times. Plenty from Mom and Dad. A couple from my classmates?

...

Ok, I do get texts at this hour.

She swiped her phone from her bed table and laid snugly, caressing Nijicat's fur with her free hand.

"hi, Ryo-san. here's the vid of the performance."

"not yours. the one you liked."

"forgot to send it sooner. mb"

'A .mov file of the performance of Endless Possibility, with Ryo's reaction in it. It's obvious that it was recorded on Sasaki's phone.'

Ryo plugged her earbuds into her phone, opened the video, and hit play.

She watched the whole thing, sharing the dumb big smile that video Ryo had.

“soooooooooo, is it good?”

“Ryo-san?”

“yeah, it’s good. thanks sasaki-san.”

“no problemo. sorry btw for the, uhh, banana rapper thingy.”

“wdym”

“idk, feel somewhat responsible for it.”

“nah, youre good Sasaki-san. it was my idea anw”

“plus, you didnt have Nijika gut punch you, so it kinda obv whos fault it is”

“hahaha, ok ok.”

“you’ve got some cool friends, Ryo-san.”

“yeah.”

“yeah, i do.”

“gonna go to bed now. night Sasaki-san”

“gn Ryo-san.”

Ryo sighed, placing her phone back onto the bed table. She plugged her earbuds into the Walkman, hitting play. She smiled upon hearing their first ever song play.

Sasaki-san's phone records well. I should ask her where she got her phone. Mental note.

Me: Yeah, parts are kinda cringe, so I'll do my best to write them in whole.

Also me: *took like 2 months to finish this and struggled to find the motivation to write from all of the pressure of 52 pages on my google doc*

Finally got this finished. This definitely is the longest thing I've written. Ever. With so many characters that idk how to write well and a big plot, this was a pain to write. Defenitely will go back to parts. And might take a small break.

Idk, maybe expect a slowdown.

Originally, the Endless Possibility performance was the only big thing to happen. Then Christmas came along, and wouldn't it be cool if everyone's families were there too, and wouldn't it be cool if Sasaki was there too for some reason and oh right Hiroi is a character, so the scope kept getting bigger. Don't get me wrong, I'm really happy with what I made (even if there probably is a bunch of errors cuz one man army lesgoo), but it took a lot out of me. And with college becoming busier, I feel like my mind's being more empty than full. If that makes sense.

Anyways, onto the actual story.

Nijika Bananaji. You are welcome.

Very cute Ryo development. The Sonic thing is definitely not connected to me. Yup. No connection at all.

You can listen to the actual song while reading. Might enhance the reading experience. Just saying. Pretty good song too.

RYO 2 BAYBEE, WHOOOOOOOOOOO! Ryo was so good, they made a sequel.

I know Nijicat's getting less and less appearance, but at this point the cat will be in the story if it will be.

Uhh, thanks for reading this far. Really.

Next thing I write comes out whenever!
